



Unfable & LokiDokie

The Tree House by Unfable

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Summary: Jim had become Joyce's rock. Her safe place when shit hit the fan and she couldn't have loved the man any more than she already did. Jim was a beacon of light in her dark and miserable life. The one man who could see past her baggy clothes, second-hand books and the bruises she attempted to hide.

1. Chapter 1

Please keep in mind this story is AU. It follows the lives of Hopper and Joyce during their childhood, teenage years and eventually to when they are adults.

Story is rated M for violence, sexual content, attempted rape and child abuse.

Originally posted on AO3. Username: Unfable and Co-Written with a friend.

An outcast. That was what Joyce Horowitz was defined as. That girl, that one girl who always had her camera in hand or a book at her nose and no friends by her side. Her teachers adored her. She constantly made good grades, was praised for her good manners and her astounding work for the yearbook. However, the story that is perceived out in the open is usually a completely different book at home. The single-wide trailer her abusive father's shitty salary provided was more like the chamber of a gun, a cold piece of steel just waiting for a bullet to rip through it.

Jim Hopper was Joyce's polar opposite. Captain of the wrestling team, the most popular guy in school. Every girl at Hawkins High wanted to catch his eye. He lived on his family farm, helping out more than he should when his father had to pull a double shift at the station. His home life and school life were in perfect sync. He was loved not only by his family, but by his peers as well. Most of all he was loved by his best friend, Joyce.

Jim had become Joyce's rock. Her safe place when shit hit the fan and she couldn't have loved the man any more than she already did. Jim was a beacon of light in her dark and miserable life. The one man who could see past her baggy clothes, second-hand books and the bruises she attempted to hide.

He had a future and she wouldn't allow him to ruin that because of her reputation. It was the main reason she'd always told him no. The main reason she tried to avoid him in the halls and why she asked to

be seated up front in classes they shared. Was she crazy for constantly turning away the most popular guy in school? Absolutely, but the need to protect him outweighed her need for happiness. He couldn't be seen in public with someone like her.

However, that didn't last. Before long, Hopper was breaking every rule in the book that Joyce had put in place for them. To not only protect herself, but to protect him too. He had gotten better at finding her in the crowded halls between classes. Always finding her secret hiding spots for lunch. Just always being the Hopper he shouldn't be in public.

"Jesus Hop!" Joyce hissed through clenched teeth one afternoon when he suddenly appeared at her locker. She didn't miss the grin on his face as she began to fumble putting her books into her locker.

"What are you doing?" She asked once her heart had returned to its normal rate and she had checked that the halls were vacant.

Hopper shook his head at her panic but glanced up and down the halls nonetheless.

"I've missed you" He pouted playfully, leaning against the locker beside hers. He couldn't help but notice her not making eye contact and simply shuffling her books in their metal storage unit.

"No one is around Joyce, you don't have to pretend that the sun doesn't shine out of my ass when it comes to me and you."

"Shouldn't you be getting ready for practice? Those jeans don't look very comfortable for wrestling." She snipped back, finally closing her locker and clearing out her combination for good measure.

"Coach won't say anything if I'm a little late. He'll just make me do an extra lap...or nine. Besides, I wanted to see you. You've been avoiding me all day."

"And for a good reason, you know the rules Hop..."

Jim stood to his full height, a good six inches taller than Joyce. The top of her head barely came to the hollow of his throat.

"Joyce, do you have any idea how hard it is to pretend that you don't exist? We are in school from seven thirty in the morning until three thirty in the afternoon. That's eight hours. Eight hours that I could be pining over you in the stairwell, but you won't let me."

Joyce frowned at the floor. Did he not know how hard it was for her to constantly push him away? To have to physically pull herself away from him or fight the urge to place her lips on his neck? She loved him so much she sacrificed her own joy just to make sure he was safe and protected.

"Please just go before someone sees you Hop." She falters, reaching to the ground to pick up her book bag.

"Joyce..." He pleaded, his hand reaching down for hers.

"Jim what's taking so long? We got practice!" Benny Hammond's voice shot through the deserted hall. Making both Joyce and Hopper jump out of their skin. Hopper quickly hit the lock on Joyce's locker, knocking the lock-free.

Hopper cleared his voice before glancing at Joyce. "Just helping with a stuck locker Benny, keep your tights on."

Benny came to a stop in front of the two of them, hands casually sliding down to rest over the dark green of his wrestling uniform.

"And why exactly are you worried about some street trash's locker? Come on dude, we're going to be late and I'm not doing extra laps because of you." Benny looked between Jim and Joyce, eyeing them both.

"You might want to wash your hands too, don't want whatever disease this thing has spreading to you or the team."

"Fucking great." Joyce mouthed to herself at the insult and turned on her heel, adjusting her book bag as she went.

"Don't be an asshole." Hopper knew he was crossing one of Joyce's imaginary lines. He knew he wasn't supposed to defend her, especially not at school, but he didn't care. Not now, when he wanted to throw his teammates head into the locker he stood beside. Joyce

was unaware that it literally made his heart ache when he had to stand by and watch people ridicule her and treat her like yesterday's garbage. No one deserved that, especially not his Joyce.

"Whatever man, seriously though, wash your hands before you come to practice, I'm not risking catching something on the mats because you decided to play hero to the trash princess."

"Bastard" Hop thought to himself as he turned to go after Joyce, only to find the hallway empty without a trace of which way she went. Sighing, he looked down at his watch. Only two hours and twenty-six minutes before he saw her again and he was already counting down the seconds.

It had been nice at first, Hopper standing up for her. She felt comfortable for the first time in her life to be around someone, let alone a guy who was twice her size that she knew she couldn't take in a fight. However It had broken her heart when she saw how the kids were starting to treat Jim differently. All because he was associating himself with the gutter trash of Hawkins. That's when the agreement had been made. They would continue being friends. Best friends, but only in secret. Hopper hadn't liked the idea at first. Liked it even less now that Joyce was forcing him to date every single girl in Hawkins in an attempt to overthrow his feelings for her, but if it meant seeing Joyce every day he would take that secret to his grave.

They had been best friends since they were three years old. The fragile bond they had created over the years had become unbreakable. Constantly playing in the pastures between the Hopper Farm and the Horowitz trailer. It was there in those hay covered fields that Jim began to fall in love with her. It was also where he stumbled onto her deepest, darkest, secret for the first time. She had been fourteen at the time, Jim just a year older. They had been chasing after each other when Joyce tripped and fell to the ground, causing her white long sleeve shirt to ride up her body where it exposed her ribs and the bruises that covered them.

That very evening Hopper set his plan into motion. Between the overgrown hay fields and abandoned barns, Hopper with the help of his father made Joyce a sanctuary. The safe place she always needed when he couldn't be at her side. The tree house was cradled in the

limbs of an old Oak tree twenty or so feet in the air. With his father's impressive carpentry skills, the tree house grew above Hoppers' expectations. He even added little shutters to the screened-in windows, making it feel more like a home than Joyce had ever lived in. The teens had tried to convince Hopper's father that the bruises had been a one-time thing. He, however, knew better. The Horowitz girl was scared of her own shadow most days, which didn't come from just a one time experience and Jim's dad already disliked Joyce's father. Having brought him to the station more than once for public intoxication and even an assault charge, he knew the guy was bad news. Nothing would have pleased him more than to bring the shit bag in for child abuse, but Jim had talked him out of it. Saying the girl already suffered enough at school without her father being the talk of the town.

Jim walked the half mile stretch from his house to the tree house. Over the years the weather had caused slight imperfections. A branch falling here or there chipping the paint. The snowstorm last year had taken out part of the railing on the backside, but with those exceptions, Joyce's haven was still standing stronger than ever. Just like the women Hopper knew was hiding inside of it at this very moment.

Hopper carefully walked toward the tree house, trying his best not to disturb the grass surrounding it. Placing his booted foot onto the first rung of the original ladder, he began his ascent. The weight and height he had gained in his numerous growth spurts didn't even seem to bother the aged wood, which didn't even bow under him as he climbed up. As he came to the top, the sound of the radio playing softly caught his ears, signaling that Joyce was indeed still mad at him. That was his reason for showing up so late after practice had ended, because he knew she was mad and didn't want to fight with her. Biting his tongue, he pulled himself into the tree house, his eyes immediately looking for Joyce.

He found her curled up on the couch with a book in hand, using the last little bit of daylight left to finish her chapter. She looked up from her book, gave him a slight wave and went right back to reading. The worn paperback in her hands was one he had seen her read numerous times and didn't even bother asking her what it was about anymore,

already knowing the tale as if he had read it himself.

"Hey" He greeted, placing a paper bag on the couch between them. She ignored him, snuggling deeper into the couch that had been purposefully placed beside the biggest window so she could read until dark.

"Mom made burgers for dinner tonight. Said she added extra cheese on yours just the way you like it. Hell, she even sent a little thing of pickles on the side so the buns wouldn't get soggy." He commented, grabbing one of the burgers out of the bag. He didn't miss the sound of her stomach growling as the smell of a hot meal filled the tree house, but in all her stubbornness, Joyce still ignored him.

"Come on Joyce, I know you're hungry. You're practically trying not to jump on dinner now." Hopper scolded as he grabbed two cans of coke out of the bag. Handing her one, she quickly took it and put it between her legs in a makeshift can holder. Her eyes moved to the bottom of the page before she folded the small corner, marking her spot and closing the book. After placing it on the floor beside the couch, she reached for her burger and Hopper noticed the calculated moves she was making.

"I'm sorry about Benny. He's been a real asshole here lately." Hopper comments as Joyce takes a small bite of her burger.

"Here lately? He's always been an asshole, you just try to see the good in everyone Hop." She comments as she takes yet another small bite.

They continue to eat in silence. Neither one of them wanting to address the elephant in the room. Deciding to go ahead and bite the bullet, Hopper speaks first.

"Look Joyce I was only trying to-"

"You know the rules Hopper! Don't talk to me at school. At the tree house, or out in the fields, you can talk and touch me as much as you want to. But out there, where everyone can see, I don't exist, got it? I'm just the gutter trash that everyone claims that I am and that's how it needs to be! I don't want to drag you down into the shit I have to deal with. So just stay away from me out there!"

"I don't want to stay away from you Joyce! You would think after years of me telling you I love you and knowing I would do anything for you, that you would finally listen! I don't give a damn about what anyone at that school thinks! My momma and dad love you and those are the only two opinions that matter to me! I don't want to fight with you about this Joyce, cant you-"

"Then why are you even here Hopper? You know I'm mad at you." She snipped.

"Yes, I know you're mad at me. But I also know that you love me and dammit I'm tired of this arrangement and having to act like I don't love you too."

Getting frustrated and needing her to be close to him, Hopper reaches his hand out to Joyce's side trying to pull her close. It's when she flinches away from his touch that he realizes it was Wednesday and she had to go to the trailer for clothes before coming there. If he hadn't known her for years, he would have just assumed she didn't want to be touched by him. However, her reaction was one of a girl who had been touched too much.

"That son of a bitch." Hopper gritted his teeth, his frustration quickly turning to a fit of white-hot anger.

"What pissed him off this time?" He questioned, trying to control his breathing. He could tell she was startled and didn't want to make it worse.

Joyce watched Hopper's knuckles turn white as he gripped the back of the couch, a habit he had developed after Joyce had pleaded with him not to punch the walls of the tree house when he was angry. With her bottom lip between her teeth, she contemplated lying to him.

"Tell me the truth Joyce, and no bullshit." He stated, not making eye contact with her.

"Got a B in calculus..." She confided, scooting into the far corner of the couch. Hopper knew she wasn't afraid of him. It was just a reflex she had developed over the years, a survival technique to make sure

she made it to the next day. He flexed his jaw. Any parent should be over the moon with their daughter making a B in calculus, especially since that daughter was taking college-level calculus in a small school like Hawkins High. She was already the smartest kid there and everyone knew that. How much more did he want from her?

"How bad is it?" He asked once he knew the anger he was feeling inside wouldn't be heard in his voice.

Silently, she lifted her shirt, exposing the new bruises forming over the ones that had still yet to heal. Her ribs looked like a child's painting. Just blotches of greens, yellows, blues and purples dancing along her side. Joyce couldn't bear to look Hopper in the eye, knowing the sadness there would make her feel even worse for getting that B.

"Jesus." He whispered, gingerly reaching out to touch around the damaged skin. Small cuts caught his attention. The dark red of dried blood not blending so well with the other colors.

"Is he cutting you now too?" He asked, his voice quiet over the sound of crickets coming in from the windows.

"They're from the clasp of the belt."

"He used a god damn belt!?" Hopper's voice jumped up in volume, startling Joyce who quickly pulled her shirt down.

Knowing he had scared her Hopper opened his arms.

"Come here." He nearly begged. Without a fight Joyce allowed him to carefully take her into his lap where she rested her head on his shoulder. Forcing back the tears she knew were trying to fall, she attempted to catch her breath. There was no denying she was as tough as they come, but even warriors can only take so much before they break. When it got to this point, Hopper was the only person she'd trust enough to see her. Knowing he wouldn't try to take advantage of her vulnerability.

"It's okay I'm right here. Just let it out." Hopper soothed as he felt her small body began to tremble against his chest. Letting her tears fall,

Joyce cried for almost an hour. Hating her life, hating her father, but most of all, loving the man whose arms were currently surrounding her like a steel fortress.

The sun had almost gone completely down, and as the room grew dim, Joyce sniffed and lifted her head to meet Hopper's eyes.

"Thank You." She whispered, wiping her sweaty hands on her jeans. "Thank you for loving me even when I give you every reason not too. You deserve so much better than this train wreck."

Hopper didn't hesitate to cup her cheek and wipe the last of her drying tears away with his thumb. He listened to her apologize endlessly. His chest becoming tighter and tighter the closer she got to breaking again.

"There's nothing in the world I've wanted more than you Joyce. You're the smartest, kindest person I have ever met and I'll never understand how no one else can see that. You're too good for this world and I don't give a damn what anyone says. They can go to hell for all I care."

Joyce couldn't help the small smile that graced her lips at his words. Anticipating Hopper's next move, Joyce leaned forward as he went to kiss her forehead, but instead of her hands staying at her side like usual, they guided Hopper's jaw downward, letting the kiss land on her lips. He tensed at first. Shocked by the boldness of her move. Quickly relaxing, Hopper kissed her back. It was slow, their lips gently meeting. Fifteen years of compassion and love poured from one another. Neither wanting to hold back their feelings any longer. Hopper found himself getting overwhelmed from the pure, raw emotion that Joyce was finally letting herself feel and parted from her, taking in a shallow breath before placing one final quick kiss on her lips and resting his forehead against hers.

Something wet touched Joyce's hand as she ran it over Hopper's stubbly cheek. Looking up, she noticed he was crying.

"That bad huh?" She asked, nuzzling into his shoulder. He didn't say a word.

When she lifted her head, Hopper was staring down at her, unshed tears in his eyes.

"Hop what's wrong?" She asked worriedly as she went to move from his lap. His arms quickly pulled her close again, hearing her gasp at the pressure on her side and quickly loosened his grip. "Nothing 's wrong Joy. It was... just completely perfect." He finished.

"So it was okay?"

"That has to be the dumbest thing you've ever asked me." Hopper laughed, snuggling if possible closer to her. That's when he realized what she meant by her question. It had been her first kiss.

"Hey look at me." Hopper coaxed his pointer finger under her chin.

"It was perfect. You are perfect. Don't ever think otherwise okay?"

Joyce smiled and placed a kiss on his collarbone. She had no idea what she was doing. She had spent the last six years of her life coming up with every excuse she could on why they shouldn't, and couldn't be together. How their friendship was risky enough, matter less throwing actual feelings into the mix. But there she was, kissing his collarbone and sending him mixed signals. A small part of her worried about what he might try to do outside the walls of the tree house now. The other was worried about what he might not do.

Hopper shivered slightly when her cool lips touched the warmth of his skin and absentmindedly tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

"Are you staying here tonight?" He asked.

She leaned into his touch without a second thought and gently nodded her head. "Yeah, don't see a point for me to go back home."

"Let's pull out the bed then before it gets completely dark." Reluctantly he pushed her to stand, taking care not to put any pressure on her left side. Once she was steady on her feet, Joyce went to the opposite wall grabbing a sheet from their small pile of supplies. This wasn't a new thing for them. Over the past four years, countless nights had been shared in the tree house. Night's spent

crying, snuggling, and just talking until the early hours of the morning. They had endured thunderstorms, feet of snow, and much more.

As Joyce started removing the cushions from the couch, Hopper unfolded the bed and pulled the old sheet off. Throwing it into a far corner of the tree house he began to unlace his boots. Standing to his full height, he unbuttoned his flannel as he watched Joyce rummage through her overnight bag. Finally, pulling out her camera.

"Will you?" She asked timidly.

Hopper frowned and dropped his shirt unceremoniously onto the floor. Taking her camera in his hand he waited while she pulled up the side of her shirt. Once again revealing the damage. He had been the eye behind the lens of every one of these photos and each time his heart broke just a little bit more. Seeing her treated this way was exhausting, but a burden he gladly shouldered. He quickly snapped the picture and handed the camera back like it was no big deal.

The walls of the tree house were covered with hundreds of pictures of the two of them. Their first night in the tree house, first fishing trip, hell even the time Joyce had almost burned the place down with a candle. They were smiling in almost every single one of them. Smiling because they were that close to each other. Hopper had stolen one to keep in his wallet a long time ago, now worn with wear. He had taken it out every night he wasn't sleeping beside her just to see her beautiful face.

But the little black box behind the couch is where her current photo went. A reminder that things were not so great for her. It was filled with countless photos of her bruises, cuts, and nightmares she would have for the rest of her life. The little black box that hid behind the smiles of the wall. A box that would hopefully be the downfall of her father.

Joyce had her reasons for keeping them. Reasons Hopper couldn't even begin to understand, but he didn't bother her about them. It was a way for her to deal and that would be enough for him for now.

"So are you technically cheating on your girlfriend if you're staying

here with me?" Joyce called over her shoulder as she pulled on a pair of sleep shorts. Glancing around the tree house she found Hoppers discarded flannel. Making a quick move for it, Joyce took off her long sleeve shirt and pulled his flannel on over her bra.

The sight of her in his shirt gave Hopper a feeling of possessiveness. To call her his and wanting everyone to know it. Joyce quickly did up the buttons before unclasping her bra, trying her best to make sure Hopper wouldn't see anything he hadn't seen before.

Brought back from his thoughts, Hopper stepped out of his jeans and rolled his eyes. "What girlfriend?"

"Don't you have a date with Chrissy on Friday night?"

"It's just a date, Joy. A date that you're forcing me to go on I might add. And besides, I've shared a bed with you for years and I'm not about to give that up."

Standing in just an undershirt and his boxers, he crawled across the bed to where she was standing, gently placing his hands on her hips. His thumbs rubbing small circles on her cold skin.

"I don't even like her and you know it." He whispered, placing another kiss on her forehead.

"You have to like her a little bit at least. I've seen you almost suck her face off." Joyce laughed as a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature covered her body. Moving back to his side of the bed, Hopper held up the blankets, encouraging her to climb under them with him.

"The only reason I make out with her or anyone else is because you said everyone would think I was queer if I didn't." He gently pinched her uninjured side as she crawled into bed with him. "I'm in love with you, not her Joyce. And one day I'm going to tell the world how I'm the luckiest man alive."

Joyce usually snuggled into his side, but tonight she crawled on top of him, wanting to rest her head on his chest.

"Well, this is new." Hopper commented as Joyce leaned down to place

a kiss on his lips, shutting him up instantly.

Joyce straddled his thighs and continued to kiss him. Unable to hold back his excitement, Hopper moaned into her mouth. The top button of his flannel had come undone, giving him a tease of what was beneath and he ran his hands through her hair, her tiny frame trembling under his touch. She explored his mouth, sloppy and inexperienced, but Hopper loved every minute of it. Becoming more eager and less hesitant in her exploration, it took no time at all for them to find a rhythm that made a heat stir in the pit of his stomach.

"I'm sorry if I'm bad at this." Joyce whispered against his lips as she came up for a breath.

"You're not, trust me." A blush he was glad Joyce couldn't see spread across his cheeks. "As bad as I hate to say it, we should probably stop." He breathed against her neck, placing light kisses down the length of it. He had purposely been keeping her sitting on his stomach, so she wouldn't feel his erection against her.

"We can't stop, if you keep kissing me..." Joyce voiced as she leaned down closer to him.

"You're right." He sighed, giving her lip one last nip as she moved to lay down beside him. Laying with her injured side facing the ceiling, Hopper laid behind her, knowing she couldn't sleep unless her back was to him or a wall. He much preferred it to be him. Just knowing she was safe beside him was all he needed.

"How are you so goddamn good at that already?" He asked into the darkness.

"I read all the time Hopper, I've learned a thing or two from the pages of those paperbacks."

He made sure she was covered with their worn-out comforter, before placing a hand on her hip. Encouraged by his touch, Joyce scooted closer to him on the bed, his chest pressed up against her back.

"Joyce?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry if I get a hard-on during the night."

"And there goes the moment." Joyce laughed and Hopper could have sworn she intentionally rubbed her ass against him.

"Joyce?" He called out once again.

"Hmm?" She responded with more of a sound this time.

"I love you."

Joyce reached for his hand in the dark and thread their fingers together. His large ones completely covering her own.

"I love you too Hop." She whispered. The words had been spoken between them numerous times before, but tonight however, Joyce felt they meant much, much more.

2. Chapter 2

Hopper woke up early the next morning to Joyce squeezing his hand. Squeezing it so hard it had brought him out of a deep sleep and was now becoming rather painful. Her soft whimpers and slight twitches instantly alerted him to the problem. She was having a nightmare. Which wasn't uncommon, especially on nights when she had an altercation with her father.

Usually, she would calm down within a few minutes and her breathing would return to normal once the nightmare was over, but this time her movements got worse, her grip grew tighter. Hopper sat up then as much as he could and pressed his chest into her back, finally slipping his hand free.

"Joyce." He whispered and kissed her temple, finding it damp with sweat. He tried again to gently direct her away from the darkness and toward his voice, but she only responded with another whimper and scrunched her face, showcasing the fear in her expression.

"Joy, it's okay, wake up." He soothed, running his hand down the length of her arm.

Without warning, Joyce began to kick in her sleep as if she was trying to fight off the demons who were currently haunting her.

"Joyce, honey you gotta wake-" And she did. So suddenly it caught Hopper off guard and he didn't have a chance to move before she plowed her elbow into his nose.

"Fuck!" He yelled out of reflex, making Joyce jump from the bed and into the corner of the tree house. As she caught her bearings, Hopper laid his head back and groaned in pain, not sure if the pounding in his head was from his nose or the headache that was sure to follow.

"Oh god, Hop! I'm sorry! Shit." Joyce panicked, moving slowly back toward the bed. Her instincts not letting her rush to his side. "Fuck, are you okay?"

Hopper had closed his eyes, the brightness of the sky outside making

his head pound even more. Fighting the sting of tears that usually accompany someone getting hit in the nose, he brought his hands to his face, wanting to curl in on himself.

"Hop I'm so sorry, let me see." Joyce begged as she crawled back into bed beside him. When he felt her cool palms on his cheeks, he softened and removed his hands away from his face, thankful there was only a little blood. He couldn't be mad at her, it had been an accident, but damn did it hurt.

"Ow." He whined, wanting to wipe the blood from his nose.

Joyce frowned, feeling terrible that she had hurt him and carefully reached up to run her fingers along the bridge of his nose. She sighed in relief when she realized it hadn't been broken.

"I didn't break it, so that's a plus." She informed him. Her voice still full of guilt.

"Well thank fuck for that." He attempted to joke, grabbing a handful of the sheets to lightly dab the blood away from his upper lip.

"Hopper I'm so, so sorry. Please don't be mad at me."

"Joyce, it was an accident. No worries okay? Next time I'll know to prod you with a stick or something." He grinned, hoping to lighten the mood so she wouldn't beat herself up over it. "You wouldn't happen to have any aspirin would you?"

Joyce was on her feet in an instant, going for her overnight bag. After a few seconds of rummaging, she pulled out a small bottle of pills.

"I don't have anything to wash them down with."

Figuring he got most of the blood from his face when the sheet came back clean on the last swipe, he balled it up and tossed it with the others that needed to be washed. "That's fine I'll take them dry."

He didn't miss the wrinkle of Joyce's nose at the mention of taking the pills dry. "That's really gross Hop."

He shrugged his shoulders, before reaching into the pockets of his

discarded jeans and pulling out a pack of Camels. Quickly lighting his first smoke of the day, he made sure to put his lighter back in his pocket since Joyce was notorious for stealing them. Taking a quick drag, he watched as she made her way back to his side. The feel of smoke in his lungs starting to make him relax.

"Trade you." She smiled, holding out two aspirin.

Hopper takes one last drag from his cigarette, before handing it to her as she drops the pills into his other hand. Throwing his head back, he swallows them without a problem, hoping they start to kick in soon.

"I don't see how you smoke these things. They're harsh as hell." She comments, slightly coughing as she inhales through the unfiltered stick.

"You know me, Joy, I like it harsh." He teased with a wink.

Joyce rolls her eyes as she walks back to her overnight bag. Pulling out a pair of baggy jeans, she glances over her shoulder.

Taking the hint, Hopper stood from the bed and opened the wooden door leading outside. The cold from the small deck brought goosebumps to his skin almost immediately. It's colder than usual for the middle of September. Soon he would have to cover the windows of the tree house with plastic in an attempt to keep the cold out or beg his father to trust them with the kerosene heater up there. Putting his back to the open door, Hopper began to piss off the deck, hoping a strong breeze didn't come through over the next fifteen seconds.

"You don't know how easy you have it with that thing Hop. You just get to whip it out wherever and go, while I have to climb down and go squat in the woods." Joyce says from inside the tree house, letting him know she was dressed. Tucking himself into his boxers, he shut the door behind him with a smirk.

"Well, I'm sorry you weren't gifted with a dick." He laughed as he tugged on his cold jeans from the floor. Joyce made to give him his flannel back, but he held up his hand.

"You keep it, it's cold outside." He insisted.

Joyce frowned. "Hopper you know I can't. Everyone would know it's yours."

"Joyce, I'm not the only guy who wears flannel shirts at that damn school. Besides, I'm not going to risk you getting sick because you're too stubborn to wear an old shirt of mine."

"What if someone smells you on it huh? Then what am I supposed to say?"

He gave her a confused look then. "What do you mean?"

"You have a distinct smell." She admitted shyly.

Hopper raised his brow. "Oh really? And what do I smell like then?"

Joyce is quiet. Not wanting to let Hopper know that the smell of his cologne, deodorant, and just him all add up to make her favorite scent in the world.

"We're going to be late if you don't come on." She changes the subject, sliding her arms back into his flannel shirt.

Hopper lets the conversation drop for now and stores it in the back of his mind for future reference. Slinging Joyce's book bag over his shoulder, Hopper climbs down the ladder of the tree house first. Shortly after, Joyce is following his lead. Making sure the small lock they have on the hatch is in place, she climbs down slowly to not slip on the morning dew coating the aging wood. When she's within arms reach, Hopper puts his hands on her side and guides her down the rest of the way. She turns to face him, her hair still a mess from sleep.

"How about a kiss for the road?" He asked, looking down at the beautiful woman in front of him.

Standing up on her tiptoes, Joyce is still too short to reach him. Grinning, Hopper bends down and places a soft kiss on her lips, making it linger for as long as she'll allow. When he pulls back, Joyce is looking him in the eyes, then her gaze shifts to his nose.

"It's starting to bruise." She sighs, reaching up to run her fingers down the bridge of it.

"It'll be fine Joyce, nothing to worry about, okay?" He promises.

Placing his arm around her shoulders, they begin the walk toward the farm. A walk that brought her a sense of peace, just knowing warmth and a loving family would be waiting at the end.

"Hopefully mom cooked Eggo's and bacon for breakfast." Jim comments as they wade through the tall grass, leading away from their secret retreat.

Joyce slowly makes her way to her bus stop as Hopper sighs and slides into the driver's seat of his truck, hating the fact that they couldn't just ride together. He'd been refused every time it was mentioned, so he didn't even bother asking anymore knowing it would end in them having an argument. Giving him a quick wave, Joyce watched as his light blue Chevy pulled off of his dirt road and into traffic. She prayed for a safe fifteen-minute drive toward Hawkins High. Looking to her left, she saw her bus coming over the hill. Adjusting her book bag and easing the death grip she had on her camera strap, she stepped onto the bus when it came to a stop.

"Good Morning Miss Horowitz." The driver, Miss Shelly greeted as Joyce took her usual seat right behind her.

"Good Morning Miss Shelly." Joyce replied as she settled into her seat. They talked politely about the weather and a program that Miss Shelly watched religiously to pass the time. Before too long, the bus lot at Hawkins High loomed in the distance. Passing the student parking lot, Joyce caught a quick glimpse of Hopper's truck parked neatly at the front of the lot and sighed in relief. Stepping down the three steps of the bus, Joyce was already walking into the halls of the school.

Making her way toward her locker, she kept her head down and her eyes on her feet, not wanting to draw attention to herself. Stopping outside her locker, Joyce sighed at the usual graffiti that seemed to manifest itself overnight. Her locker had been painted more times than she could count, yet the school still didn't seem to care she was

a victim of ruthless teenage bullying. The usual nasty notes and slurs toward her tumbled to the floor as she opened the door. Picking up the trash, Joyce noticed a folded piece of notebook paper.

Her heart gave a slight flutter as she quickly and carefully unfolded the note.

I love the way you look in my shirt - H

Grinning like a loon, Joyce quickly refolded the note and stashed it in her spare pencil pouch at the back of her locker. The bell signaling the five-minute warning chimed through the school as Joyce grabbed her English book and headed down the hallway. English was her favorite class of the day. If only Hopper was in it with her. She sits in the front of the classroom as usual, daydreaming about Hoppers' note. Every chance she gets she buries her nose in his flannel, comforted by the fact that she has a small piece of him with her throughout the day.

Her day passes in its normal fashion. English, Calculus, World History, and finally lunch. Heading toward the cafeteria, Joyce takes the hallway in quick stride. Avoiding bumping into any of her classmates, she's successful in dodging any hurtful slurs. In the second-floor corner however, she almost runs into a tall figure who has decided to stop in the middle of the hallway to have a conversation and bumps into the guy in front of her. Joyce drops her English folder, her notes and assignments flying everywhere.

"Watch where you're going trailer trash." A snide feminine voice calls out to her as she bends over to pick up her papers. A large hand is in Joyce's line of sight and she glances up to meet Hoppers' eyes as he helps her gather her things.

"Take it easy Chrissy, it was an accident." Hopper voices as he stands and hands Joyce her papers.

"Thanks." Joyce whispers as she stuffs everything back into their folder. Moving onward to the cafeteria, Joyce could feel Hopper's eyes on her. Chrissy's voice reaches Joyce's ears.

"I don't know why you're so nice to her. She's a freak." Chrissy

changes the subject when Hopper doesn't reply. "So where are we going tomorrow night?"

Joyce doesn't hear Hopper's response as she ducks into the cafeteria, anxiously needing a smoke and a few minutes to get her shit together.

Her fourth class of the day had been canceled suddenly and Joyce felt saddened at the thought of not having a substitute since that was the one class she had with Hopper today. Sighing, she heads to the library to work on a paper for English. Settling down at a table toward the end of the library, Joyce continued her outline for her paper which was due in two weeks. She had decided to do her report on Hamlet. Mystery, Death, poisoning your relatives, this was something Joyce had thought about on more than one occasion. Walking toward the Shakespeare section of the library, Joyce was lost in thought as she made her way through the maze of shelves and paperbacks. Taking a sharp right at the end of the library, Joyce is met with the sound of kissing. "Go make out in the stairwell" she thought to herself. Turning down the Shakespeare isle Joyce stopped in her tracks. Leaning against the bookshelves were Hopper and Chrissy.

Chrissy had her hands locked around the back of Hopper's neck, his resting against the shelves behind her and Joyce felt her stomach drop at the sight of them, so close together you couldn't see any space between them. Joyce took a step back, not wanting to alert the couple in front of her. That's when her baggy jeans worked their way under her shoes and made her stumble into the shelves, knocking several books to the ground.

Hopper and Chrissy abruptly broke apart, both of their eyes landing on her.

"What the hell are you doing?" Chrissy demanded as she looked down her nose at Joyce.

"Nothing, I'm just-"

"Nothing, I'm just stalking Jim." Chrissy mocked as she let go of Hopper's neck.

"You've been following us all day, and by the way Jim-" Chrissy said turning to face Hopper. "Isn't that the shirt you were wearing earlier this week?"

Joyce froze where she stood. Not knowing whether to make a run for it or to stand her ground.

"Yeah, it's my shirt. My mom gave it and a few other things that won't fit me anymore to her mom. Figured it needed to go to someone in need." He stated, looking back at the blonde.

Reaching down and taking her hand in his, Hopper lead Chrissy down the aisle and toward the front of the library without giving Joyce a second glance. An unfamiliar emotion suddenly swept over her. All she wanted to do was ball her fists up and punch the shelves surrounding her. Why she felt like this she couldn't say. She had never wanted to punch anything or anyone in her life, but the sight of Hopper threading his fingers with that tramps left a sour taste in her mouth. Knowing she would never be able to focus on her paper now, Joyce packed up her belongings and headed toward the bleachers on the football field, needing a smoke more than she ever had in her life.

Her cigarette under the bleachers did nothing at all to settle her nerves. Wanting to just be alone for a while, she decided to walk home from school. It wasn't anything she hadn't done before, having spent long hours in the library after school doing homework or working on projects.

Not even making a stop back at her locker to unload her books, Joyce began the walk home. She made it about half a mile before she heard a horn honk. She didn't bother paying it any attention until it honked again, only this time a hell of a lot closer. Looking up she saw Hopper's truck coming to a stop beside her.

"Get in, it's too cold for you to be walking." Hopper called out as he opened the passenger door to his truck.

"No thanks Hop, I need the exercise." Joyce snipped back.

"Joyce, there isn't an ounce of fat on you now come on before

someone drives up behind me." He pleaded.

Ignoring him, Joyce continued walking. If she pretended he wasn't there long enough maybe he would leave. She heard the rev of an engine and glanced up as Hopper drove his truck ahead of her. She let out a sigh of relief until she realized that he had pulled over and was stepping out of his truck.

"What are you doing? I told you I didn't- Hey put me down!" Joyce yelled as her world was literally turned upside down when Hopper tossed her over his shoulder as if she were nothing more than a sack of potatoes. He opened up the driver's door on his truck and stuffed her in the cab. Climbing in, he slammed the door and turned the heat on full blast.

"Why do you always have to fight me huh? If you would just listen then things would go a hell of a lot smoother!" He scolded as he pulled back onto the road.

"What if someone sees us, Jim!?"

"I don't give a rats ass. It's cold and you're not walking back to the farm."

Joyce gave him a glare. "Who said I was going back to the farm?"

"It's Thursday Joyce. Every Thursday Momma makes that fried chicken you love with mashed potatoes, that awesome brown gravy, and green beans. You haven't missed that meal in four years. So yeah, I know what you're doing tonight. You're coming back to the farm. We're going to knock out my chores real quick, and then you're going to take a shower before we eat."

The tone of authority rang loud and clear in Hopper's voice and Joyce couldn't even bring herself to argue with him. Like a child who had just been scolded for acting out, she crossed her arms over her chest, secretly loving the heat that was pouring through the air vents.

The dirt road that led to the Hoppers Farm was bumpy, to say the least and Joyce held onto the passenger door for dear life as Hopper made the drive. Hitting a rather large hole, Hopper's driving made

her small frame leave her seat, causing her to hit her head on the ceiling.

"Ow Hopper! You did that shit on purpose!" She pouted as she rubbed the sore spot on her head.

"Well maybe if you came over here instead of sitting on the far side of the cab you wouldn't move so much." Narrowing her eyes, Joyce scooted across the bench seat and into Hoppers' side. He completely failed at hiding his grin when he put his arm around Joyce's shoulder for the remainder of the trip. Coming to an abrupt stop outside of the Hopper House, the duo climbed down from the truck. Stepping up onto the front porch, Joyce hung back as Hopper opened the front door.

"Come on Joyce, I gotta change into my work clothes before we get started. You might as well come in and talk to my mom."

"I still don't think she likes me." Joyce replied wiping her shoes off before stepping into the front entryway.

Hopper rolled his eyes. "Are you kidding me? She adores you. Do you really think she would let me sleep in a tree house with you almost every night if she didn't?"

Hopper hung his coat up by the door before making his way toward the kitchen. Joyce followed hesitantly, still worried about his mom not liking her even though she'd know her practically her entire life.

"Hey, Kiddos! I was wondering when y'all were coming in." Jim's mother Mary greeted as she poked her head out from behind the fridge door.

"Yeah mom, we're fine, just stayed a little late at school." Hopper told his mother as he kissed her cheek and scooted her out of the way of the fridge. Bringing a half-gallon of milk to his lips, Hopper drank straight out of the carton.

"For God's sake Jim, get a glass!" She scolded, grabbing the milk from his hands and placing it back in the fridge.

"Don't need one now, I'm not thirsty anymore. I'll be back down in a

few and we will get at it okay?" He stated at Joyce who was still standing shyly in the corner of the kitchen.

Mary shooed him up the stairs and grabbed a thermos from the counter. Pouring something from a pot on the stove into it, she quickly replaced the cap and handed it to Joyce.

"It's getting cold out there and I know you don't really like coffee. So I made some hot chocolate for you to take to the barns with you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hopper, you didn't have to do that." Joyce's quiet voice thanked the lady who had been more of a mother figure to her than her own.

"Darlin, I've been taking care of you for years, you ought to know by now I do what I do because I love you, and Jim does too."

Joyce feels her ears go red from the rush of blood to them. Just as she was about to say thanks again, Jim came bounding down the stairs, a flannel coat thrown over his arm.

"Were heading out to the stables mom, we should be back in an hour or so." Hopper informed his mom as he took his rightful spot by Joyce's side.

"If y'all get too cold come back inside and take a break, okay?" Mary instructed, looking at the both of them in that stern way only a mother can.

"Yes ma'am." Joyce replied, making her way to the front door. Before she has it open, she feels Hopper's hand on her elbow. Looking behind her, he's holding out a coat.

"Your not going out there without a coat, and don't argue either." He said as Joyce opened her mouth to protest.

"Come on, it's my coat from last year, I can't fit in it anymore."

Sighing in defeat, Joyce places the thermos she was holding onto the small bench in the entryway, before turning her back to Hopper. In a matter of seconds, he is helping her slide it up her arms. Turning her to face him, Hopper quickly zips it and adjusts the collar.

"There, now you won't be getting sick and I won't be worrying."

Joyce rolled her eyes as she bent over to pick up the thermos. "Ready to go shovel some horse shit?" She laughs as she grabbed the handle of the front door.

"I heard that young lady!" Mary's voice called from the kitchen.

Hopper couldn't contain his laugh at the look on Joyce's face as she bolted out the door and toward the barn.

Grabbing the handle to the door of the barn, Joyce has to use all of her strength to push it completely open and is instantly greeted by the excited neighs from the four horses currently hiding inside from the cold. Turning on the lights, Hopper feels a tug at his heart when he sees Joyce quietly conversing with the oldest of their horses. He's the first one by the door and everyone's favorite.

"Why don't you work on feeding and brushing them, and I'll do all the shoveling." Hopper suggests as he carefully wraps his arms around Joyce's waist, nuzzling his cold nose into the heat of her neck.

Joyce frowns. "That's not fair to you Hop, You'd be doing all of the hard work."

"It's not hard work Joyce, and besides you take forever when you're shoveling." He teases.

Joyce playfully pushes against his chest and he doesn't even move with her efforts. She shivers when he places a kiss to her neck. A kiss, that brought the scene at the library crashing back into her mind.

"So I guess things are going pretty great with Chrissy huh?" Joyce stated, not even trying to hide the disgust in her voice.

"Come on Joyce, you know that's not fair. You told me at school to act like you don't exist, which is what I was doing. I was there looking for you when Chrissy found me. Next thing I know she's throwing herself at me and then you come around the corner."

"You didn't answer my question, Jim."

"Well, what do you want me to say, Joy? That I didn't enjoy her kissing the pants off of me? I'm a guy! Of course, I was going to like it." He admits.

"So you liked it huh? Glad to know, because that kiss I gave you this morning is going to be the last one you'll get from me, Jim Hopper!"

Joyce is mad. Madder than she's ever been at Hopper and she honestly doesn't know why. He was right, he was only doing what she told him to do. Completely ignore her and act as if she didn't exist within the walls of Hawkins High. She couldn't understand her anger toward him, especially since he was doing exactly what she asked.

Taking a deep breath, Joyce went to the storage containers that housed the horse brushes. Grabbing one off the top, she set to work brushing the horses while Hopper shoveled shit and laid down fresh hay. Both of them ignored the other. Too mad to even hold a simple conversation. Finishing just as the last bit of light fades outside, they make their way back to the house. Kicking off their shoes before they go inside, they are met with the delicious smell of fryer grease and Joyce immediately heads upstairs towards the bathroom.

In the small linen closet at the back of the bathroom, Joyce finds some of the clothes that Mary has washed for her. Picking out a shirt that's two sizes too big and a pair of sweatpants, Joyce is still timid by the fact she actually has clothes in someone else's home. Why Mary and Greg put up with her she'll never know. Tuning on the water, she patiently waits for it to heat up before stepping into the shower.

The hot water cascades down her body, soothing her bruised muscles and surrounding her in a blanket of steam. She looks down over her body, taking inventory of scars, bruises, and bumps. What Hopper saw in her she would never know. Scars across her belly, shoulders, and hips that she would have to deal with for the rest of her life flashed up at her with every move she made. Sighing, she reached for her washcloth and soap she knew undoubtedly was Jim's. There was something she associated with being safe in that Old Spice smell. She washed quickly, shampooed her hair and was out within ten minutes. Wanting to make sure Hopper had enough warm water, she quickly

dressed and left the bathroom.

Dinner paled in comparison to how it usually was every Thursday night. There were no giggles from the two teenagers or comments about work from Greg. Even Mary picked up on the strange behavior from the kids who were both picking at their plates. Jim was the first to ask permission to be excused. He placed his plate and silverware into the sink before going upstairs to shower. Joyce patiently waited until Mary and Greg had finished eating before she began cleaning the kitchen.

"Joyce you don't have to do that darlin', I got it taken care of." Mary's voice came over her shoulder as Greg left the kitchen, his recliner and the news on his mind.

"It's no problem Mrs. Hopper, I want to earn my keep."

Mary nodded, appreciative of the help, even though it wasn't needed. Once the dishes were clean and the table wiped down, Mary instructed her to go upstairs and get some rest. Joyce thanked her once again for her hospitality before heading up the short flight of stairs. She walked the familiar path to Hoppers bedroom and opened the door without thinking, just wanting to lie down for the night.

"Jesus! Ever heard of knocking?" Hopper yelled as he grabbed for the towel he was about to let fall from around his waist. He didn't miss the flush of Joyce's cheeks as she turned around long enough for him to slide on a pair of boxers.

Joyce didn't say a word as she went to his closet and pulled down her pillow and comforter. Folding her comforter, she placed it neatly on the ground followed by her pillow and just as she began to kneel Hopper's voice shot out from behind her.

"What are you doing Joyce?"

"Making my bed, what does it look like?"

"Umm well, it looks like you're making your bed on my floor, which isn't going to happen."

"And why not? it's the cleanest floor I've ever slept on. I should be

honored really." She snips.

"Joyce you're not sleeping on the floor. Get your pillow and get in the bed." Hooper instructed, putting his hands on his hips for good measure.

"I'm not sleeping in the bed with-"

"Do you want me to throw you over my shoulder again?" He threatens.

"Hop I'm not-"

"Do you?" He asked again.

Hopper started the walk across his room to Joyce's figure and as he reaches her, his hands shoot out, grabbing her and picking her up.

"Okay! Okay! I give!" Joyce voiced as loud as she could without alerting Greg and Mary.

Hopper let go of her hips, placing her feet back on the floor.

"Always so grabby." Joyce hissed as she plucked her pillow up off of the floor.

"One day you will listen to me the first time and we won't have to argue about you being wrong." Hopper says with a smirk.

Climbing into Hopper's bed, Joyce laid on her uninjured side facing the window. Hopper walked across the length of his room and turned off the light, casting them into total darkness. She felt him crawl into bed and start to get comfortable, then not so gracefully threw his leg over hers.

"Why are you laying all over me?" Joyce huffs.

"What do you mean? I always sleep like this."

"No you don't, you just want an excuse to be close to me."

"Do you not want me close to you?"

"I didn't say that." She rolled over to face him, careful not to put too much pressure on her ribs.

"Well, what the hell do you want Joy! You want me to touch you, but not touch you. You want to sleep together, but not sleep in the same bed. You want me to ignore you at school, but be the center of my attention at home or the tree house. What do you want?! What can I do to make you happy?"

"I don't know!" She whisper screamed back at him as she scooted further away.

Arguing led to fighting and fighting led to hitting in Joyce's experience. She knew she would be fucked if she ever pushed Hopper over the edge and he lost his temper. Sensing her discomfort, Hopper began to count to twenty in his head, trying to calm the waves of emotions that were currently hitting him one after the other.

Reaching twenty, Hop lifted his hand to cup Joyce's cheek, only to have her flinch at his slight touch. The look of fright in her eyes alarmed him. Did she really think he would hurt her?

"I'm sorry Hop." she whispered, slowly trying to close the space between them.

"You know I would never do anything to hurt you right?" He questioned, gently laying his hand on her hip. Joyce nodded into his shoulder.

"I know, and you know it too. It's just a reflex. My fight or flight instincts kick in and I just have to get out of harm's way. There would be no way in hell I could take you on in a fight."

"Joyce, I promise you on everything I hold dear, that I will never lay a finger on you in anger. The only time I'll ever put my hand on you is to pull you closer, or grab your ass okay?" He hears her sigh and feels the weight literally fall off of her shoulders as she snuggles into him. He rests his cheek on the top of her head, giving her a moment to get her heart rate back under control.

"I was mad at the library today." She whispered, not even sure if he

could hear her.

"Why were you mad?"

"It's hard to explain. I just turned the corner and you were there with her. She was hanging all over you, and all I wanted to do was pull her off by her hair and hit her."

Hopper lifts his head up and looks down at her. "You're jealous." He laughs, giving her a slight squeeze.

"No, I'm not jealous Hopper, it's just that she was touching you and..."

"She was touching what's yours and you weren't happy about it." He placed his cheek on top of her head again, trying to get comfortable in the full-size bed.

"Is that really what I felt in the library? Jealousy?"

Hopper intertwined their hands. "It's a hell of a feeling isn't it?"

"Yeah, I didn't like it at all. Not to mention, I didn't like her tongue down your throat."

"Well how about you put your tongue down my throat and we forget about Chrissy?" He whispered into her ear.

Her smile was all the consent he needed. Hopper leaned down and placed a slight kiss to her lips and when he felt her kiss him back, it was like every ounce of stress left his body. She gently gave his lip a questioning nip and he inhaled sharply at the sting. Gently, he put his hands on her hips and pulled her on top of him. Smiling at the sudden gasp leaving her lungs.

"Joyce, you know you're the only woman I want." He murmured as he ran his hands slowly down her sides and kissed her exposed neck.

"You're all I want too, Hop." She breathed, loving the feel of his lips on her neck. At her words Hopper stilled. Not truly wanting to believe she had said them out loud.

Running his hands through Joyce's hair, Hopper laid beneath her.

"Does this mean that you want to be with me?"

"You know I want to, more than anything, but we cant. I won't have you jeopardizing your future over a silly crush." Joyce whispered as she laid her head on his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

"You really think this is just a silly crush?"

"Hopper please, we can't. I cant. You deserve a woman who can give you the world without fear of what her father might do to the both of you." She sighed, half asleep.

Choosing his words carefully, Hopper kissed the top of her head. "I want all of those things from you Joyce. I just hope you're willing to give them one day."

Hopper was met with the sound of Joyce's soft snores. Her anger today had led to exhaustion, and the exhaustion has finally led to sleep. Holding her as tight as he could against his chest, he closed his eyes, dreaming about a day when that tree house wouldn't be the only place he could love her.

3. Chapter 3

The agonizingly loud sound of Hopper's alarm sets Joyce's heart into a panic. She jumps as his arm leaves her side to smack at the snooze button on the nightstand and quickly starts falling back to sleep. His hand goes across her stomach, touching the soft skin close to her waist band and she sighs. Not wanting to leave the warmth of Hopper's bed, Joyce snuggles back into his chest and stretches lazily, her body perfectly aligned with his. Hopper's hand is back on her hip and Joyce loves the heat coming off of his body. It's not until he unconsciously thrusts his hips forward just a little bit that Joyce feels it. A part of Hopper she has never seen, matter less touched is wedged between her ass cheeks.

Joyce suddenly jumps out of his arms, not knowing where to go. Her sudden movements waking him.

"Joyce what's wrong?" He calls out, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with his thumbs.

"Umm Hop, you umm, your dick was uh..." Joyce couldn't finish her sentence, pointing down at Hopper's lap, he finally realizes what's happened.

"Shit." Hopper yells, grabbing for Joyce's pillow to cover his hard-on.

"Don't put my pillow on it!" She cries, moving back toward the bed.

"Well it's either your pillow or my hand, you make the decision!" Hopper yells back, trying to sit up without giving Joyce another show. His alarm goes off again, making both of them jump and he quickly yanked the cord out of the wall, the sudden silence of the room filled only with the sound of their breathing.

"Joyce, we knew this could happen. I'm a guy, and you're a very attractive girl and sometimes it just has a mind of his own and-"

"Hopper stop talking!" Joyce demands as she comes to sit on the edge of the bed. Hopper is still holding her pillow tightly over his middle.

"Look Hop, it's fine. It just took me by surprise that's all. I wasn't expecting to wake up to that first thing in the morning."

"So first thing in the afternoon is fine? Because that's what I'm hearing." Joyce huffs at Hopper's lame excuse for a comeback.

"That was so bad that if my pillow wasn't currently covering your dick I would throw it at your face."

"Well, I can always take it off." Hopper teases as he goes to move his hand.

"Don't you dare!" She scolds.

"Ok, ok." He laughs.

"Joyce?" Hopper calls out after a minute, watching as she shifts her line of vision from her hands to his face.

"How mad would you be if I said I liked how it felt?"

This time Joyce didn't care if she saw his dick. Quickly grabbing her pillow, she smacks Hopper with it. Knowing she's going to have to wash it before she uses again.

Hopper tries to cover his laugh with a cough and takes the pillow away from her so she doesn't hit him again. Looking down at the watch on his wrist, he realizes if they don't get a move on, they're going to be late.

"Come on Joy, I can drop you off close to the school and no one will be any wiser."

Missing the first two classes of the day had Joyce distraught. She was never late. So why in all the days she could have been, today was the day for her to miss a quiz. She had completely lost track of the date with everything going on this week.

Hopper didn't seem too concerned about anything at lunch as Joyce sat and watched him over the peanut butter and jelly sandwich had made for her that morning. He was sitting on top of one of the lunch tables, Chrissy sitting between his legs on the bench below. Her

elbows were resting on his knees and that unfamiliar rage that accompanied jealousy filled her stomach again. Losing her appetite, Joyce put her sandwich back in its Ziploc, saving it for later. She got to her feet, attempting to throw her trash away when she felt eyes on her. Glancing up, her eyes met with Hoppers and he casually scratched the stubble on his chin with his pointer and middle finger.

Joyce instantly noticed his signal asking if she was okay. She replied with a roll of her eyes and glanced at Chrissy, before gathering her book bag and camera. She made her way to the front of the cafeteria and out the side door. The need for a cigarette was overbearing.

Yearbook was the last class she has for the day. Even though her classmate still didn't have a thing to do with her, it was easier knowing her work would be appreciated, or at least looked at fifteen years from now when her peers were flipping through their old class momento. Working on a piece for the wrestling team, Joyce flipped through her photos, taken one evening at a match with their school rivals. Hopper had their captain in one of his unbreakable holds.

Skimming through the rest of the photographs she had selected for this piece, Joyce noticed they all had the same key element. Hopper. She hadn't taken a single photo that didn't have him in it. She felt the skin of her collarbones begin to warm at the sight of him. He really was the perfect guy. He always had her back, in more ways than one.

Turning over the next photograph, Joyce wrinkled her nose in disgust. In the background, cheering Hopper on was Chrissy. Joyce remembered the conversation Chrissy and Hopper had in the hallway on Wednesday when she dropped her English folder. Where are we going on Friday night? Chrissy had questioned as Joyce stalked to the cafeteria. Hopper had a date with Chrissy tonight. Thankful she hadn't finished her lunch, Joyce neatly stacked the photographs into their folder, before dropping it into her bag.

The parking lot at school had cleared with the exception of Hopper's truck and Joyce hung back at the staff parking lot, ensuring no one would see her hanging about. When Hopper's tall frame came into view, she waited until he was at his truck before running toward him, the hood of her flannel coat covering her face.

Hearing the sound of running shoes, Hopper looked up, surprised to see Joyce hadn't already started the walk home. He grinned as he watched her gracefully jump through his driver's side door and scoot down into the floorboard of the passenger side.

"You know you don't have to sit down there Joyce. There is literally no one here who will see you riding shotgun." He chuckled as he climbed into his truck and slid his key into the ignition.

"Still too much of a risk. I don't want anyone to say anything that might compromise your date tonight." Joyce comments sourly and folds her arms in the passenger seat.

"Come on, you can't be mad at me for going on a date that you forced me to set up." Hopper stated, turning his truck out onto the main road. Adjusting himself in his seat, he did a quick check in his mirrors, before letting Joyce know the coast was clear. He watched as her small form uncurled from the floorboard and climbed into the seat. Without being prompted to do so, Joyce slid across the seat and right into Hopper's side. He quickly put his arm over her shoulders like he usually did and allowed her to rest her head on his shoulder.

"Guess today was a little stressful for you huh?" He questioned, as he flicked on his turn signal and turned right onto Murkwood.

"You could say that. I'm just not feeling myself today." She sighed, snuggling closer to his chest.

"I don't have to go on that date tonight you know. I can stay home, we can eat some soup or watch a movie or something. Maybe hang out at the tree house? I can read one of those cheesy romance books aloud to you if you want." Hopper offered, already planning out a night with her in his arms.

"We can't do that Hop. You know as well as I do if you cancel on Chrissy she's just going to show up at the farm. Which would lead to me, and I don't have the energy to deal with her tonight."

They sat in silence for the remainder of the drive, neither one of them knowing what to say. Finally reaching the farm, Hopper and Joyce quickly knocked out his chores for the evening. The sun had started

to set when they unceremoniously walked onto the porch of the farmhouse, sliding off their shit covered boots.

"I'm going to go jump in the shower real quick, you can hang out in my room if you want. You gotta help me pick a nice shirt to wear." Hopper whispered as they climbed the steps toward his room. Taking his suggestion to heart, Joyce followed him.

Sliding off her jeans and putting on a pair of his sweatpants, she laid across his bed, making sure to use his pillow and not her own as she waited for him to get out of the shower. Mary had recently bought him an Orange flannel shirt that Joyce had fallen in love with. It wasn't too tight but showed off his form nicely. Maybe that and a pair of his darker jeans. Probably his nicer boots instead of the ones out on the porch.

Hopper got out of the shower, trying not to focus on the feeling of dread in his stomach. He really didn't want to go on this date. There was just too much that needed to be done at the house. The hayride was coming up in a few weeks for Halloween, not to mention that a fence still needed to be mended on the western pasture and he still needed to put plastic over the windows at the tree house. All of this he and Joyce could be doing together, but no. She was forcing him to go on a date with Chrissy, even though she knew good and damn well that he didn't really even like her. Hell, he didn't even want to be in the same room as her. He just wanted Joyce. The kisses they had been sharing over the past few weeks were more than what he could have ever needed. He just didn't understand why she couldn't see that.

Quickly running his towel over his hair, Hopper wrapped it around his waist and left the bathroom. Ignoring the trail of steam that followed him down the hallway. Opening the door to his bedroom, his eyes land on Joyce's small frame, currently snuggled up in his bed, her arms wrapped around his pillow. The fight he had been wanting to pick dropped from his mind. She never fell asleep this early. Walking over to the bed, he sat down facing her. Her hair had fallen down into her face and he reached out as gently as possible to tuck the strand back behind her ear. When she didn't move, he knew she was out cold. Guess she hadn't been lying when she said she was exhausted.

Looking at his watch, Hopper saw it was seven-fifteen. He had told Chrissy he would pick her up at eight. Going to his dresser he pulled out a pair of boxers and slid them on under his towel. Once he was safe in the confines of his cotton prison, he let his towel fall to the floor. Walking to his closet, he picked out a shirt he thought would be suitable for the occasion. An Orange flannel that his mom had bought him earlier in the month. Grabbing a pair of jeans, he pulled them on, jumping a few times as he got them up onto his hips.

By seven-thirty he was ready to go physically, but mentally, he wasn't in the game. He had no desire to leave the farm or Joyce, not even for a few hours. She was still sleeping when he put on his cologne, looking peaceful while she slept. He wished she was that peaceful all the time. Squatting down in front of her, Hopper once again slid her unruly hair behind her ear.

"I wish it was you I was going out for a night on the town with." He whispered, not wanting to startle her. When she didn't move, he leaned down and ever so gently kissed her temple. He could have sworn that she sighed in her sleep. Standing, he covered her with his old quilt and turned the light off as he went out the door. On to a date he has been dreading for weeks.

Joyce awoke in total darkness. Taking in her surroundings, she realized she had fallen asleep in Hopper's bedroom. Sitting up on the bed she read the time on the clock. It was nine forty-five.

"Shit." She thought to herself as she climbed out of bed.

Grabbing a piece of paper out of Hopper's desk, Joyce wrote him a quick note saying she had gone to the tree house. Quickly signing her name, she grabbed her coat off the floor and headed downstairs. On the kitchen table was a bag full of snacks and clean sheets. Mary's familiar script was flowing across a sheet of paper saying she had stocked up on their usual supplies, washed the sheets, and was heading into town with Greg to get plastic for the tree house windows. The maternal feelings Mary always exuded for Joyce were lovely, if not entirely strange. Joyce wasn't her daughter and yet she treated her like one. Always making sure she had clothes on her back and food in her stomach. She hoped that one day she would be able to repay the Hoppers for everything they had done for her.

Picking up the bag of supplies off the table, Joyce made her way out onto the front porch. She grabbed the spare key from under the loose board of the bird feeder and locked the house up, then made her way to the tree house.

She knew the path by heart, not even needing a light to guide her and being alone out in the fields didn't scare her as it used to. Two years ago she wouldn't be caught outside after dark unless Hopper was with her, but now she had no fear, at least not of the animals that usually stalked about the outskirts of farm at night.

Careful not to step off the path that led to the tree house, she sighed when it came into view. Her supplies seemed to grow heavier with each step she took. Stuffing the bag into her book bag, Joyce began the climb up the ladder, careful not to drop her key for the lock in the process. Opening the hatch, she climbed up and into her sanctuary.

It looked the same as it had a few days ago with the exception of the dirty sheets and clothing missing from the corner. Mary probably swung by and grabbed them, and Greg to gauge the amount of plastic he would need. Her books were still in the corner and Hoppers .22 still on the gun rack on the opposite wall. Glancing at the floor she noticed the random bits of dirt and grass scattered around on the floor. She hadn't been feeling herself, and the cleanliness of the tree house shown the effects. Going to their small kitchen area, Joyce filled their baskets with the snacks Mary had left. Fluffing the small table cloth that sat atop their makeshift table, Joyce began to clean. It was what she had been trained to do, so to speak. Go to school, come home, and before you even think about doing your own thing, clean the house, cook dinner, and clean again before homework. If she was lucky, and her father didn't get angry, she could then take a shower, do her school work and go to her room, hopefully being able to lock the door before he noticed.

She once again opened the hatch to the tree house and began to sweep the dust and debris out onto the grassy field that her tree was surrounded by. Picking up the little piece of trash here and there, Joyce was finished in no time. She quickly closed the hatch and returned the broom to its corner. The little bit of cleaning she has done had drained her for some reason. All she wanted to do was lay

in the bed and wait for Hopper to find her.

Moving the cushions from the couch, she stacked them neatly at the foot of the fold out. Adding a fresh sheet and comforter, Joyce climbed onto the bed, putting her back against the opposing armrest. Using what little moonlight that was flicking through the trees, Joyce found herself lost in a new novel, and not for the first time.

Chapters later, a rustling brought her out of her fictional wonderland. Glancing out of the big window she froze. A light was shining through the woods. Of the four people who knew where the tree house was, none of them needed a flashlight to find it. Her pulse started the quicken at the thought that her father had found her hideaway. What if he was trying to come and get her right now? Carefully getting up from the bed, Joyce tiptoed toward Hopper's gun rack.

When Hopper had first found out about her father's abuse, he had taught Joyce how to use his rifle.

"It won't kill them if you aim for an arm or leg, but it sure as fuck isn't going to feel good." He commented as he stood behind Joyce, showing her how to aim.

Remembering the hours of target practice by Hopper's house, she moved back to the couch, once again looking out the window to see the light had gotten closer. Sitting with her back to the wall and the twenty-two in her lap, Joyce watched as the flashlight circled the tree house twice. Not coming close enough for her to see who was wielding it, she watched it retreat back into the woods in the direction of her trailer.

Twenty minutes later, the sound of Hopper's secret knock filled the tree house as he opened the hatch. Joyce had the twenty-two pressed into her shoulder, not sure if someone had learned his secret knock.

"Jesus Christ Joy!" Hopper yelled as he climbed the rest of the way through the opening.

"What's going on, Why do you have my rifle out?" He asked, worry clear in his voice.

Joyce was off the couch and in his embrace in seconds. Wrapping her arms the best she could around Hopper's waist, she handed the rifle over to him.

"Joyce you're scaring me, please tell me what the hell is going on." He stated against her hair.

"There was someone out there Hop, out in the woods. They had a light and I know you and your parents don't need one. They left and headed east like they had walked here from my trailer! What if it was him? What if he found me?" The words rushed out of Joyce's mouth in a jumbled mess. Hopper could feel her shaking under his arm.

"Look, Joyce, it's okay. I'm here now. I'm here and nothing is going to happen to you okay? We need to calm down and catch our breath before you go into a panic attack. Just breathe." Hopper encouraged her as he put the safety back on the rifle and laid it across the small table.

"I can't keep doing this Hopper. One day he's going to find me and he's going to beat the shit out of me. It gets worse every time. You've seen what he can do."

"I know honey, I know just breathe okay, you're starting to scare me." He pleaded.

At the mention of Hopper being scared, Joyce began to focus on getting air into her lungs. Knowing that she wouldn't be able to recover from a panic attack when she was already exhausted, she sank against him. He carefully grabbed her around the waist and lifted her into his arms.

"I got you, Joy, I always do."

He placed her on the bed before toeing off his boots and unbuckling his belt.

"You shouldn't be out here now anyway, it's too cold without the windows covered."

"I don't want to be a burden on your family Hopper. They already do so much for me." She whispered as she picked at her fingernails, a

habit Hopper knew meant she was nervous.

"Your not a burden Joyce. My parents love you, I love you. We will do anything for you and you know that." Standing to slide off his jeans, he begins to quickly unbutton his shirt. A small part of him is ecstatic that Joyce doesn't look away like she usually does. Sliding in beside her, he opens his arms.

"Come here and let me hold you."

It takes no more encouragement for Joyce to snuggle into his embrace. Her hand lands on his chest, absentmindedly playing with a few of the curls that started to appear two years ago. They lay there in silence, Joyce just breathing in the smell of him. His fingers are running through her hair, trying to soothe the anxiety he knows is bubbling beneath in her body. It's when Hopper shifts that Joyce smells a hint of a flowery perfume on him.

"How was your date?" She whispers into his collar. Hating the fact that she can smell her on him.

"Nothing special. Went and got a hotdog, and then she talked my ear off as we drove around. Then I took her home." He waited for Joyce's reply but she didn't say a word.

"I feel like you're mad at me." He stated as he pulled her closer.

"I feel like I'm mad at you." She began to pick at her fingers again. He put both of her hands in one of his to stop her.

"Let's just not talk about it okay? I just want to lay here with you. And I'll say it again, you are the only woman I want to be with."

"I know Hop. You don't know how much I hurt because I want to be with you too."

Hopper placed his thumb and pointer finger on her chin, encouraging her to tilt her head up. When her eyes met his in the dark, he ran his thumb over her bottom lip.

"All you have to do is say the word and I'm yours. For as long as you'll have me."

"That's what I'm afraid of. What if I want you forever and you decide you don't want me? I would be completely lost without you." She admits.

"You really think I wouldn't want you for the rest of my life? I want to be with you more than anything. Not just here, but everywhere. I want to walk down the street with you on my arm. Showing everybody that you're mine, and I'm yours."

Leaning down, Hopper placed a light kiss on her lips. He was overcome with joy when he felt her press back. He felt her nip him, asking permission to enter his mouth and he gladly offered her what she wanted, running his tongue across her lower lip. He felt her hands go up to his hair, carefully running her fingers through it where she gently pulled his head back, wanting access to his neck. He felt her place a kiss over the pulse point in his throat and the sensation of her tiny bites were doing things to him he had only thought about with her. His boxers were becoming snug with the excess flow of blood and before he knew what was happening Joyce was straddling his thighs.

"Joyce. I don't think you want to do that." He breathed out, not wanting his growing length to take her by surprise.

"I just want to sit right here okay Hop? Just let me be close to you for a while, I promise I'm not going to do anything else. I just want you to be close to me."

Hoppers' hands are resting on Joyce's hip as she once again lays her head on his chest. He's sure she can hear the pounding of his heart beneath her ear. His hand moves to the small of her back where he lets it rest. Staying like this for hours, Joyce's exhaustion is more than she can handle, she's sleeping against his chest and Hopper doesn't move a muscle.

The weekend goes by in a blur of chores and helping winterizing the tree house. This weekend is the Hoppers Hayride for Halloween. With so much to do and so little time to do it, snuggle sessions between Hopper and Joyce have become scarce. They have mowed the lawns, decorated the farm for Halloween, started working on canning vegetables from the garden. The tree houses windows are now

covered with thick sheets of plastic, and the back deck has been reattached. By the time Sunday rolls around, everyone on the farm is exhausted. Greg is called into the station to deal with an arrest warrant that has dropped in his lap. Kissing Mary on the cheek he heads out the door waving to the kids who are sitting on the front porch swing. The sight of Greg pulling out of the driveway reminds Joyce that she has run out of her necessities from home.

"Hop I have to go to the trailer." Joyce says as she threads her fingers with his.

"Whatever you need from the trailer I can get for you tomorrow after school."

"You don't understand, I'm bloated and I'm cramping. I need to go get that stuff. Not to mention my Halloween costume is still there."

"Come on Joyce, you know I can get whatever you need. I don't want you to go back to that place." He says with a note of finality in his voice.

"It's Sunday Hopper, he won't be there. I'll climb in my window like I always do, grab my stuff and bolt. You can meet me at the tree house and help me get everything inside. We will be back in time for dinner, I promise you."

He squeezes her hand. "I don't know, I have a bad feeling about this."

"I have to go. If I'm not back in an hour, you'll know where I'm at. You can simply swoop in and rescue me okay?"

Sighing, he lets go of her hand. She takes that as her signal to go.

Hopper is looking down at his watch. "You have exactly one hour Miss Horowitz. If you're not back by then I'm storming that trailer got it?"

"Yes sir." Joyce laughs as she gives him a small salute before leaving the porch and heading toward the fields.

The closer she gets to the trailer, the more anxious she becomes. Hopper was right as usual, something doesn't feel right. Climbing

over a fallen tree, the small trailer she has lived in off and on since she was three comes into view. It's brown with rust and a lack of cleaning. Her small front porch should be condemned just by itself. Keeping to the woods, she walks up to her bedroom window and listens for any sign of movement inside. Finding the coast clear, Joyce steps on top of the cinder blocks below and slowly opens the window. Pulling herself through, she tumbles over the threshold landing firmly on her shoulder. She fights through the discomfort of falling at such a weird angle and rights herself. Sitting up and regaining her composure Joyce stands to her feet with the help of her dresser.

"Well, Well, look who finally decided to bring her ass home." A voice as cold as snow echos through her bedroom. Her heart rate doubles in seconds.

Stepping out from the empty space between her dresser and her bookshelf is her father. "I was wondering when you were going to bring your sorry ass home. Figured you wouldn't be too much longer. It's been about two weeks since you snuck in here last." Travis has moved so close she can smell the whiskey on his breath.

"Figured you just come sneaking back like you always do, taking what you haven't earned. You think just because it's in this house that you have some sort of claim to it?"

Joyce tries to steady her breathing as Travis runs his finger up her throat. Her knees have started to tremble and she anticipates the harsh hit she knows is coming. Looking down, he notices Joyce's jacket.

"Where did you get this thing at? I know you can't afford it on your own. You got you a sugar daddy out there somewhere?" Joyce doesn't answer, not wanting to give away any information that could lead back to the Hoppers. A hand smacks across her face so fast Joyce didn't see it coming and the all too familiar sting flashes across her cheek. She doesn't reach her hand up to touch the reddened skin. Knowing it just eggs him on.

"You're going to break into my house and then ignore me?!" Her father yells, his spit flecking onto her face and neck. He reaches out

and grabs her tightly by her upper arms and she knows she is going to have bruises there. Just like she already has on her ribs.

"You're not going to leave this time you little bitch." He yells and smacks the same cheek again. Unable to fight back the tears that come with trauma to the face, she keeps her mouth shut, refusing to give him the satisfaction that she's hurting.

Grabbing Joyce by her hair, he pulls her into the living room. His favorite place to deliver punishment since the room is bigger than the bedrooms, allowing him more range to swing and kick.

"I'm going to teach you to leave again, and when I'm done with you, you won't be able to climb through any windows matter less walk." Joyce scrunches her face up, prepared to take whatever he wants to give to make through the twenty or so minutes she has until Hopper comes looking for her.

Banging at the door startles her, making her jump under her father's hand.

"Mr. Horowitz, this is the Hawkins Police Department. We know your inside, we heard you talking. Open the door or we're coming in!" A voice yelled from the other side of the front door. Grabbing Joyce by her neck, he pushes her onto the couch.

Crouching down in front of her he whispers into her ear. "Not a word from you or I'm going to break your arm, got it?"

Joyce nods her head and watches as Travis walks to the door, straightening his shirt as he goes. Opening the door, Joyce sees Greg Hopper taking up the width of the frame. Greg takes a look into the house, spotting her on the couch and then looks back to Travis.

"What can I do for your chief?" He asks, bringing his practiced charade to life.

"Mr. Horowitz, I have a warrant for your arrest. Seems you missed your court date on Friday."

"My court date is set for the 25th chief." Joyce's father spits back as he places his arms across his chest and leans into the door frame.

"Yes, sir, and today's date is the 27th. Now, why don't you go ahead and turn around and we can get this done and over with? Mary has dinner on the stove and I'm ready to go home." Glancing behind Greg, Joyce saw three more deputies at the ready. Knowing he wouldn't have a chance in hell of running, her father slowly turns around. His eyes back on Joyce.

"I'll deal with you when I get back. Don't you leave this house." He threatens.

"You alright over there Miss Horowitz?" Greg's voice calls as his deputies put her father in the back of their squad car. Joyce is afraid to move. Knowing her father can see her through the open window.

Greg steps out onto the porch, instructing the deputies to head back to the station. Letting them know he was going to take a statement from Joyce then head home. Not needing to be told twice, they follow their chief's orders. He waits for the deputies and her father to pull out of the driveway before he is at her side.

"Joyce, darlin are you alright?" Greg asks as he squats down in front of her. He can see the unmistakable hand print on the side of her face and places his hand on her knee, not wanting to startle her by touching her face.

"What were you doing here? You know if you needed anything we would get it for you."

"I don't want to be any more of a burden than I already am." She whispered so quietly Greg barely hears her.

"Honey you're not a burden. You know if you just let us help you the legal way you wouldn't have to see him ever again. I can make him go away."

Joyce shook her head. "Everyone would know. I would be treated as more of a freak than I already am." She's continuing to fight the tears that are wanting to leave her body, the only way of coping she has left. Knowing she's going to break soon, Greg helps her stand up.

"Come on darlin, get what you came for and let's go home. We're

going to clean you up and put a hot meal in you. I'm sure Jim is starting to go stir crazy worrying about you." Joyce nods and stands shakily on her feet, but loses her balance and grabs onto Greg for support. She doesn't realize she hugging him until he wraps his arms around her. She's crying into his pressed uniform shirt, not even caring she's leaving tear stains on it. Greg simply holds her, letting her cry and patting her head until she can't cry anymore. Finally catching her breath she steps back from him. Trying to hide the shame she feels for breaking down in front of him, she walks into her bedroom and quickly grabs her Halloween costume and the remainder of her clothes. Greg loads her stuff into his Suburban and helps her climb into the seat.

"Come on Joyce, let's go home."

4. Chapter 4

Monday morning reared its ugly head in the form of a cold for Joyce. Everything hurt. Her face, her hands, even her teeth, but no amount of coaxing from Hopper or Mary could keep her from school. She had already missed class on Friday because of Hopper's boner and she wasn't going to miss more because of a little cold. However, she was going to dress as comfortably as she could to make her day a little bit easier.

Finally crawling out of Hopper's bed, she pulled on her favorite sweatpants, a long sleeve shirt, and the new to her flannel coat. She didn't miss the look of concern Hopper gave her as Mary attempted to help her cover up her father's latest work.

"All I'm saying Joyce, is that you don't have to go to school. There is no way you can fail. Your grades are way too good." Hopper called from the doorway as he watched his mother layer some kind of makeup on her face.

"Jim, if she says she feels okay enough to go, then let her go. You can always bring her home if she gets worse." His mother scolded as she looked over Joyce's face.

"You're good to go dear." Mary informed her in that maternal manner she always seems to have.

"Thanks, ."

"Joyce you can call me Mary honey, or mom, or whatever makes you comfortable okay? We're way past the formal stages of name-calling." Mary laughed as she gathered her makeup off of the counter. Joyce slipped out the bathroom door under Hopper's arm before he could try to talk her out of missing school again. After fifteen minutes of attempted breakfast, Hopper's antics, and a round of medicine, Joyce had enough of Hopper bugging her.

"Look, if it will shut you up I'll make a deal with you." She sighed, rubbing her temples.

"Alright, I'm listening." Hopper mumbled, still wanting Joyce to stay home and rest, but he quickly turned a chair from the dining table around and straddled it. Munching on a piece of toast he waited on Joyce's proposition.

"I'm still going to attempt to go to school, however..." Joyce continued as Hopper opened his mouth. "I'll ride with you to school instead of waiting on the bus."

Hopper continued to chew his toast, acting as if he was thinking over her offer. Finally swallowing, he cleared his throat.

"Fine, but if I see you puking or anything at school I'm bringing your ass home. Got it?"

"Jim language in the house!" Mary scolded over her first cup of coffee.

"Deal." Joyce held out her hand to Hopper. Giving it a quick shake, the teens finished their breakfast before grabbing their book bags off of the mudroom floor. Stepping out into the cool October air, Joyce was beyond thankful that Hopper had given her his old coat. It was drizzling, adding to the spooky vibe that seemed to flow from Hawkins once the leaves started to turn.

Hopper opened the passenger side door to allow Joyce to climb inside the cab. Jumping behind the wheel in seconds, Hopper quickly turned the key so he can get the heat going.

"I'm trying Joyce, I know you're freezing, I can see you shivering from here." He comments as he grabs a cigarette out of his coat pocket. He quickly lights it, taking in a lung full of smoke, then holds his hand out. She shakes her head without a word. They are driving down Main Street. Hopper has the radio playing quietly, not wanting to make Joyce feel worse with loud music first thing in the morning. Pulling into the student lot, he doesn't miss the double takes people are giving his truck as she searches for a parking spot.

"Promise you'll tell me if you want to go home?" He asks, making it seem like he was messing with his radio instead of talking to her in his truck.

"I promise Hop. I'll see you at lunch okay?" She gently takes his hand in hers and gives it a slight squeeze. Grabbing her book bag, she exits the truck, pulling her hood up against the drizzle that has now become a light rain. Hopper sighs as he watches her walk toward the school. Her shoulders are hunched against the wind, and he has a feeling in his gut that today isn't going to be a good day.

Today fucking sucks Joyce thinks to herself as she slowly makes her way through the crowded hall and into the loud cafeteria. She winces at the screams and raucous laughter of her fellow students. You would think some of them didn't have basic manners instilled into them, or maybe Joyce was the only teenager in Hawkins who had been so scared to fuck up she made a point to be quiet. Finding her usual table in the corner of the cafeteria, she lays her book bag down on the floor, thankful to be free of the burden that is thirty pounds of school texts and notebooks. As graceful as a fish out of water, she flops down onto the cold bench and rubs her eyes. Her congestion had worsened since this morning, making breathing out of her nose impossible.

Maybe Hopper was right, I should have stayed home today she thought, pulling her hood up and laying her head down on the lunch table. Hoping a short nap would at least get her through until the end of the day, Joyce lightly dozed. She didn't even care at this point if someone threw trash at her or was talking shit from across the lunchroom.

The feeling of a cold hand on her forehead roused Joyce from her nap. She didn't have the energy to pull away from whoever was touching her.

"Just leave me alone." She begged, too tired to sit up.

"Jesus, Joyce, you're burning up," Hopper's voice sounded from her right.

"Hop, what are you doing? People can see." She whispered, not wanting to draw attention if it hadn't been drawn already.

"I don't care. You're sick and I need to take you home. You haven't moved in fifteen minutes."

"It's called a nap Hop, you should take one every now and again." Her scratchy voice replied as she lifted her head off of the table.

Just as Hopper was about to give Joyce yet another speech on her health, a shadow loomed over the lunch table.

"Jim? What are you doing sitting here with this loser?" Chrissy's voice thundered, making Joyce want to shove her fingers in her ears.

"She's my neighbor Chrissy, if my mom knew she was sick and I didn't check on her, she would have my ass." Hopper smoothly replied, his eyes not leaving Joyce's face.

"Obviously she's still breathing, that's all you need to worry about." Chrissy griped, moving to stand in front of Hopper, who now had his back to the table. Joyce closed her eyes, wishing for the room to stop spinning. She barely saw Chrissy sit down in Hoppers' lap and place one of her arms around his shoulder, making Joyce smirk. Was this girl really trying to pull something territorial over him? The thought made her laugh, which earned a glare from Chrissy.

"And what's so funny trash princess? I see you found a newer pair of sweatpants, what did they set you back huh? Six months of rent?"

"Chrissy, stop calling her that. She's not some random street trash and you know it." Hopper hissed. He could feel that familiar heat rising up his neck.

Joyce felt her throat start to tighten, spit pooling in her mouth.

"And why do you care what I call her Jim? You looking to be the prince of trash now?" Chrissy snipped, reaching out from her perch on Hopper's lap to shove Joyce's shoulder.

Joyce sits up, turning her back to the table as well. She swallows, not wanting to fight with her.

"Hop, I think I-" Joyce starts before she interrupted by Chrissy.

"Hop? She has a pet name for you?" Enraged Chrissy moves from Hopper's lap to stand in front of Joyce.

"You got a little crush on my boyfriend?" Chrissy questions loudly, drawing the attention of the cafeteria.

"Chrissy that's enough." Hopper growls, knowing the situation is quickly spiraling out of control.

"Hop, I don't feel so good..." Joyce whispers, reaching out to him without thinking of who they are in front of. Seeing her hand moving toward Hopper, Chrissy smacks it away, deterring her from touching Hopper's arm.

"Who the fuck do you think you are? Trying to touch Jim like you have some kind of claim on him!" Chrissy yells, bringing what onlookers who weren't already watching to join the show.

"Hop, I think-"

"Chrissy I said that's enough!" Hopper yelled, interrupting Joyce as he stands up from the table. Following his lead, Joyce stands, her knees shaking beneath her. Trying her best to keep herself between Hopper and Joyce, Chrissy moves, facing Joyce, her hands on her hips.

"Where do you think you're going Horowitz? He's mine!"

"I'm not yours Chrissy, Jesus I don't belong to anyone, I'm a fucking human being!"

"Hop-"

"We went on a date Jim, which means we are dating!" Chrissy shouts.

"Hopper-"

"That doesn't mean were official! I never asked you to be my girlfriend!"

"Hopper!" Joyce practically yells as she quickly taps him on the shoulder.

"What?!" He yells back, getting caught up in the emotions that are surrounding their small table.

That's when the vomit Joyce had been trying to hold back, spews from her mouth, and right onto Chrissy pretty pink sweater.

The cafeteria is silent. No one dared to breathe.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me!" Chrissy screams, as she tries, and fails to find something to wipe her shirt with. Joyce just stands in front of her, wiping her mouth with the back of her sleeve.

"I think I'm going to puke..." Joyce mutters, trying not to let out a small laugh at the look on Chrissy's face.

"You bitch! I'm going to fucking kill you!" Chrissy screams as she lunges for Joyce. Hopper quickly steps in front of her, not even caring that he is getting puke all over his boots.

"Miss Carpenter, my office now!" A loud male voice rings through the cafeteria. Principal Shepherd stood several feet away from them, both of his hands on his hips. "Go to the nurse's station for a clean shirt on your way. As for you Mr. Hopper, take Miss Horowitz home immediately. I don't want a virus spreading around the school."

"Yes Sir." Hopper replied, grabbing Joyce's book bag off the floor.

"Sorry about your sweater Chrissy, I'm sure I have something in your size if you want to come over some time" Joyce quickly called out as Hopper led her out of the cafeteria.

The rest of the week Hopper and Joyce both stay home. Taking turns puking and cleaning the bathroom. Mary babies them with chicken noodle soup, rounds of medications and lots of sleep. By Saturday, all fevers, and coughs are gone, much to the relief of the two teens. Saturday is Halloween, the second favorite holiday of the year for the citizens of Hawkins. The annual hayride which is held at the Hopper's Farm is set to start at sundown. Children and families of all sizes flock there for food, freight and of course candy. Joyce and Hopper are upstairs, both getting into their costumes for the evening.

Joyce is dawning a traditional witch costume, which is way more form fitting than she would like. Then again, actually showing off the curves of her body feels good for once. Her costume has shrunk a

little since last year, making the fabric stick to her hips and chest like a second skin. As she smooths down her hair and puts on her witch's hat, she hears Hopper let out a whistle.

Turning around, Joyce finds Hopper standing in the center of the room. His chest is puffed out, and his hands on his hips doing his best superman pose. The tan uniform he's donning shows off the muscles he has gained from years of working on the farm. A toy gun is in a holster on his hip, along with a pair of handcuffs.

Joyce can't help but laugh as she walks toward him.

"Oh no, officer is something wrong?" She playfully teases as Hopper opens his arms and allows her to step into them.

"Yes, ma'am there has been a disturbance call placed for a naughty witch at this address. You wouldn't know anything about that would you?" He jokes, not being able to keep a straight face.

"What did you have to bribe your dad with to make him let you borrow this?" She asked curiously.

"Oh nothing much, just had to promise I'd stick around the house tonight with a certain girl, handing out candy instead of scaring the shit out of people."

"Ahh so not too much then." Joyce giggles as she runs her fingers over the gold name tag on the right side of Hopper's chest.

"You look really good in this uniform Hop. Thinking of following in the footsteps of your old man?"

"Hell Joyce, I don't know what I'm doing next week, matter less after school." He laughs as he runs his hands down her arms and continues until he finds her hands.

"All I'm saying is you can totally pull it off, Hop. Just gotta grow a mustache and you're the new Chief of Police in Hawkins."

"A mustache huh? Think I can pull it off?"

"Without a doubt chief." Joyce smiles, standing up on her tiptoes, but

still unable to reach Hopper's lips. Pouting, Joyce stares up until Hopper leans slightly down to her level.

"And what exactly are you doing ma'am? Bribing a cop with bodily favors is against the law." He murmurs, bringing his hands down to rest on her hips.

"I'm not bribing you with anything officer, just practicing putting a spell on you. Is it working?"

"More than you can imagine." Hopper places a light kiss to Joyce's forehead. Hearing the doorbell ring, the two take a second longer to admire each other before pulling apart.

"Come on Chief, we have candy to hand out." Joyce calls, walking out of the bedroom with Hopper hot on her heels.

"Trick or Treat!" A group of kids call out from the bottom step of the front porch.

"Oh my goodness your costume is beautiful!" Joyce coo's over the kids who are patiently standing with their candy bags open at the ready.

"What do you say kids?" Their mother says from the sidewalk.

"Thank you, and Happy Halloween." They reply back in unison as they bound down the sidewalk. Their mother gives a quick wave as she goes after her children, all of who are already talking about what candy they want to trade. Joyce sits down on the top step, thankful that her top is long-sleeved. Moments later a coat is dropped down onto her shoulders. Turning back, she sees Hopper coming back from the front door, his father's winter coat is being adjusted around his shoulders.

"Gotta keep up with appearances ya know, being the Chief is a tough job." He jokes as he adjusts his belt. Sitting down beside Joyce, Hopper rests his hand on her knee. Peeking into the bowl in Joyce's hand, he pulls out a candy bar and carefully rips the wrapper.

"Hey! These are for the kid's officer." Joyce scolds as she grabs a candy bar for herself.

"Well, I think those kids were the last of the trick or treaters anyway. It's going on midnight ya know? I mean look, even mom and dad are heading back to the house." He comments at the sight of his parents approaching the house, hand in hand. Spotting the kids on the porch, they watch as Mary whispers something into Greg's ear, causing a smile to spread across the man's face.

"That's a smile saying if we want to sleep tonight, we should go to the tree house." Hopper whispers as he places the candy wrapper in his coat pocket.

"Hey, parents have to get it on every now and again too." Joyce whispers back, laughing at the playful shove Hopper gives her with his shoulder.

"How did it go tonight kids?" Greg asked as they approach the steps.

"Everything was fine, had about sixty kids come by and still got plenty of candy to munch on the next few days." Joyce stated, shaking the half-full bowl for emphasis.

"That's up to you kids, I don't need anything else sweet. It goes straight to my gut." Greg laughs as he pats his belly.

"Y'all going to the tree house tonight?" Mary asks, trying not to be too direct with her question.

"Yeah mom, figured we've been in your hair long enough this week. It's time for some you time ya know?" Hopper comments as he stands to his feet. That's when Joyce notices just how much Hopper looks like his father. Both of them are tall, even for a man. Broad shoulders, narrow hips. The only difference between the two is the laugh lines on Greg's face and his blonde hair.

"Don't go messing up my uniform Jim, I only have ten others that look exactly like it." Greg laughs as he follows Mary up the steps.

"Y'all be careful going to the tree house okay? It's Halloween, ain't no telling what kind of ghosts are out in those fields." Mary points her finger at the two of them.

"Yes ma'am, we'll be careful." Joyce comments, as she stands,

wobbling slightly in her heels.

"We'll see y'all tomorrow when we start cleaning everything up. Goodnight you two." Greg calls from the front door as he carefully closes it. The sound of the deadbolt sliding home rings out onto the porch before Hopper and Joyce are met with silence.

"Guess they really want to get to it." Hopper states as he takes Joyce's hand in his. Mindful of where she is walking, Joyce follows Hopper out toward the east pasture.

"Hold on a second, we have a little detour to take." Hopper whispers closely to her ear.

"What do you mean a little detour?"

Following Hopper to the horse stables, Joyce cringes when the loud moan of the barn door opening rips through the air.

"Hopper, what are you doing?" She whispered, not wanting to accidentally step into a horse patty.

Hopper is back outside the barn in seconds. He quietly closes the door, before returning to Joyce's side, a bottle of whiskey in his hand.

"Where did you get that from?" She questions as they began to make their way toward the tree house.

"So dad and I had another tiny part of that deal we made. He said that if we went to the tree house tonight so he and mom could have some alone time, he would let me have what's left in this bottle." Hopper states, turning the bottle over in his hand.

"Wow, your dad actually said he would allow you to drink underage so he can get laid?"

"I guess getting some makes a man do crazy things." He smirks.

"Hopper don't talk like that, it's your parents it's gross." Joyce says as they step off the trail and into the woods.

"I'm just saying Joy. My mom must be amazing in the sack if he's

willing to share this with me." Joyce wrinkled her nose at the mere thought of Mary and Greg messing around.

"Okay stop now, I don't want to imagine your mom and dad getting it on."

Standing at the base of their tree, Hopper unscrews the cap off of the bottle.

"Ladies first?" He puts the bottle under Joyce's nose, allowing her to smell the whiskey.

"You're such a gentleman Officer Hopper." She smirks, taking the bottle from his hands and bringing it to her lips. Taking a few small sips from the bottle, Joyce quickly hands it back to him, who is trying his best not to laugh at the face she is making.

"Whoa, that shit burns!"

"Well yeah Joyce, it's whiskey, it's supposed to burn." Hopper takes a long drink for himself. He swallows and slightly gasps for air.

"It's whiskey it's supposed to burn." Joyce mocks as Hopper winces.

"Get your ass on that ladder women!" Hopper jokes, walking closer to it.

"Don't you be looking up my dress sir, I'm a lady and I will be treated as such!"

"Yes ma'am I won't look up your dress, scouts honor." Hopper holds up a three-finger salute with his right hand. The left, still dutifully holding their bribed whiskey.

"Do you know how hard it's going to be climbing up this ladder in heels?" Joyce says over her shoulder as she begins her journey up.

"Don't worry Joyce, if you fall, I will try my best to catch you. Or at least break your fall." Hopper chuckles as Joyce pulls herself through the hatch.

Putting the bottle underneath his chin, Hopper quickly climbs up

after her.

She's already taken her heels off, and throws them into a corner. Now without the added height, and Hopper's boots still on, she is eye level with his sternum.

"How do you always end up being so much taller than me?" She whines, placing her hands on her hips. "Hell, you can probably see clear over my hat cant you?"

"I mean, I would be lying if I said no." Hopper giggles, taking another drink from the bottle.

"Come on, let's get the bed pulled out before you get too plastered." Joyce laughs from beside the couch. She's already taking the pillows off of the fold-out when Hopper joins her, a fresh sheet in his hand. They quickly make their bed, before deciding to get comfortable. Joyce walks toward her clothes, which have now all been moved to the tree house. She's looking for her favorite pajama pants when she feels Hopper step up behind her.

"Can I help you officer?" She asks, turning around to wrap her arms around his waist.

"Mhmm, I don't know if you can ma'am. You haven't seen a devilishly handsome man running around here have you?"

"Can't say I have Officer."

"Ouch, that one hurt Joyce." He laughs, placing his hand over his heart, feigning a life-threatening chest wound.

Reaching for the bottle in Hopper's hand, Joyce unscrews the cap, taking a much longer drink than she did back on the ground.

"I can see how this can mess someone up." She coughed as she handed it back to Him. The amount of liquid left in the bottle was significantly lower than when they had retrieved it from the barn.

"Me too, guess that's why the old man only lets me have it on special occasions." Hopper's voice is lost in Joyce's neck. She doesn't know if it's the whiskey or her own selfish need, but she allows Him to kiss

down her skin. The feel of his stubbled cheek sends goosebumps all over her arms. His hands are on her hips again. His thumbs rubbing along her pointy hip bones and she doesn't realize they are swaying until Hopper pulls away from her neck.

"What are you doing Hop?"

"I think the adults call it, dancing." He laughs, standing up to his full height, she's at least a foot shorter than him.

"Oh is that what we're doing? A witch and the Chief of Police, dancing in a tree house on Halloween. Sounds like a horror movie waiting to happen." She giggles, resting her head on his chest.

"I mean, I'd pay to see it. Just saying." He commented bringing his right hand to the small of her back while his left held her hand.

"Whatever you do, don't step on my feet, those boats you have would break my toes."

"Come on Joyce, they aren't that big."

"Hopper you wear a size thirteen! I wear a six. That's over double the size!"

"Shhhh, this is a time for dancing, not mathing."

"Is mathing even a word?"

"This is not the time for English lessons either. Less talking, more dancing." Hopper murmured into the top of Joyce's head. A few moments later, they come to a stop. Standing in the middle of the tree house, Hopper leans down and places a kiss on her lips.

"Thanks for the dance chief." She whispers slightly pulling away.

"Anytime ma'am."

"Come on, let's get out of these costumes, I'm getting tired."

Joyce is back on the other side of the room. A pair of pajama pants in her hand.

"Will you?" She asks Hopper as she gathers her hair over her left shoulder. He quickly drinks the last bit of whiskey from the bottle before walking toward her. Hopper couldn't say what it was about Joyce's neck that always made him think inappropriate thoughts, but he stroked one finger down the length of it, making her shake. Gently pulling the zipper down, Hopper placed his lips to her neck, giving it a slight nip.

"Next year you need to go as a vampire for Halloween." She breathes, not noticing the slight hitch in her voice.

"Why, you want me to bite you?"

"And what if I say yes?" Joyce asks, turning once again to face him.

"I'd say it's inappropriate for me to leave bite marks on you where anyone could see."

"Who said anything about you leaving them on my neck?" Joyce whispers. She starts to unbutton Hopper's uniform shirt, agonizingly slow, one button at a time.

"Joyce, what are you doing?" Hopper questions, his voice dropping an octave.

"Just getting into a little mischief on Halloween, if that's okay with you chief?"

Hopper doesn't say a word. He simply moves his hands, allowing Joyce to continue her work as her small fingers untuck his shirt from his pants. She's reaching up, trying to push his shirt off his shoulders, but not quite able to reach.

"Why don't we lay down huh? Make it easier for you to reach everything?" Hopper suggests, already sliding the holster and toy gun from his belt.

"It's as if you read my mind, Hop." Joyce laughs, turning to slide her dress off of her shoulders. Hopper doesn't even pretend to look away. Joyce is standing with her back to him in nothing but a bra and panties and he's shocked when he notices they match. The dark color a cool contrast to the tone of her skin. Before his eyes can get their

fill, she's pulling an oversized shirt over her head and turning to face him. Joyce carefully took off her bra, pinpointing the exact moment that Hopper's eyes focused on her chest. Walking over to him, she looks down his body, noticing a slight bulge that he normally hid so well.

"Let me help you with your boots." She whispered, turning around and placing both of her feet on either side of his left leg. She bends over and began to unlace his boots, her ass is right against the seam of his pants. Hopper carefully reaches out, not wanting to startle her and places his hands on her hips, ever so slightly pulling her back into him.

"Jesus Joy, are you trying to kill me?" He practically growls as she pulls off his first boot.

"I have no idea what you're talking about Hop." She innocently says over her shoulder as she starts unlacing the next boot, swaying a bit to the effects of the alcohol.

"Uh-huh, sure you don't." He breaths, trying to focus on anything but her ass against him. Before he's ready, Joyce slides his other boot off and moves away from his body.

"Come on, I'm cold" She says, crawling into the bed.

Hopper's fingers are shaking so bad it takes him a second to undo his belt. Finally releasing the clasp, he unbuttons his pants and carefully lets down his zipper. He knows Joyce can see the size of him through his boxers and he's tempted to run his hand down the front of them. He quickly pulls his undershirt over his head, slides off his socks, and climbs into bed deciding not to tease her.

Moonlight is coming in through the big window, casting shadows from the branches outside along the bed. Joyce is laying on her side, watching Hopper as he places the covers over his waist. She scoots closer to him wanting to feel the warmth of his body. Once he's in reach, she places a kiss on his neck, right over his pulse point, but before she could stop herself, shes nipping and kissing down the length of it.

"Maybe you should be the vampire next year." He gasps as she gives a rougher bite to his skin.

"Hmm, I think it would like it better if you were the vampire." She whispers against him.

"Your wish is my command."

Hopper is on top of her in seconds, his lips meeting her neck. He feels her move beneath him, doing nothing but forcing even more blood down beneath his stomach. He's licking and biting Joyce on the neck, encouraged by her hand on his bicep.

"Hopper, you can't really leave a mark on me. Your parents would freak." She gasps out as he sucks the skin of her throat into his mouth.

"Then I'll just leave my mark where they won't see it." He whispers as his hand reaches under her shirt, skimming the skin on her rib cage. He feels her body arch into his touch. His hand resting at the bottom of her sternum. Hopper can feel the heat coming from her breast. So close, but just out of reach. Looking up, Hopper meets Joyce's eyes and she's biting her lip in anticipation. Giving him a nod, Joyce takes in a sharp breath and she feels Hopper's hand completely cover her breast. He can feel her nipple hardening under his palm almost instantly. Carefully adjusting his hand, he rolls the hardening bud between his fingers, smiling to himself with the soft moan that's sitting in Joyce's throat. Sitting up, he brings her with him. Raising the hem of her shirt, he carefully slips the fabric over her head, completely exposing all of her for the first time. She's perfect. Joyce tries to bring her hands up to cover herself, but Hopper stops her.

"Please don't hide from me Joyce, you're so beautiful, I just want to see you, please." He begs, moving closer to rest his chest on her stomach. She slowly moves her arms away, allowing him to see all of her. Reaching out, he palms her again. Fascinated by the feel of her soft skin.

"I'm sorry they're not that big." She whispers, laying back down on the bed.

"Joyce, your beautiful just the way you are."

He's at her collar bone, kissing down to her sternum, nipping and licking along the way. Joyce reaches out, running her hands through his hair. She gives a slight pull, coaxing him downward. Hopper leaves a trail of light kisses over to her nipple. Looking up to Joyce to make sure she's okay, Hopper keeps eye contact as he sucks the tight bud into his mouth, where he's rewarded with a soft moan. Instantly, Joyce is pushing her chest out, wanting Hopper to be even closer to her body and he gently bites her, loving the way she's squirming beneath him. His right hand moves to her other breast, rolling her nipple between his fingers, while his tongue lashes out against the other. With a slight pop, he pulls away, kissing just above her nipple, then sucks her skin into his mouth, loving the way she tastes. He's careful not to hurt her, but wanting to make his claim, he bites and sucks for as long as she can stand. Finally, when he feels her pull his hair again, he releases her, smiling down at the bruise that's going to peek out from the top of her bra.

"You're mine, Joyce." Hop says, resting his head on her chest, looking up into her eyes lovingly.

"I'm yours Hop." She sighs, falling back into the pillows with him still laying on her chest. The effects of exhaustion, whiskey, and hormones, lures the two to sleep, neither of them worrying about the headache they are more than likely going to have tomorrow.

5. Chapter 5

Three days. Three amazing days Joyce didn't have to worry about a single thing. The slight hangover that endured Sunday had been long gone. School had surprisingly gone well, no one wanted to come near her for fear of projectile vomiting. Hopper constantly left cute little notes in her locker, all of which had some kind of cheesy vampire joke on them. Normally she would have quickly put a stop to it, afraid someone would see him lingering around and start asking questions, but after finding out it wasn't a prank, she realized how much she enjoyed the attention. The simplicity of them is what made it so special, so very Hopper. Just those few words written on a crumpled piece of notebook paper propelled her emotional high. She felt as if she could take on anything and anyone in the world. Until the day came she was reminded she wasn't allowed to be happy.

It started with small things. Someone calling her a pervert for snapping shots of the wrestling team working out for the yearbook. Someone making fun of the sweater she'd chosen to wear that day. Stupid petty remarks just to get under her skin and thankfully biology was the last class she had for the day and one she happened to share with Hopper. Unfortunately, due to an ongoing group project, Hopper hadn't been able to move his seat up front next to Joyce. Instead, he had been forced to continue to work with Chrissy, who made a point not to speak to him unless it was about their project.

Of course, no one had wanted to partner with Joyce, so she was yet again going at another project alone. Thankfully, she didn't really need this biology class. She had only taken it as a demand from her father, wanting to make sure she had every possible school period filled. At least she knew most, if not all of the material, so she didn't really need to pay attention.

She had been doodling on a piece of paper ignoring the teacher when she felt something hit the back of her head and it only got worse when she reached up and felt something sticky stuck in her hair.

"Chrissy, what the hell?" She heard Hopper ask, turning around to see him staring daggers at the women to his right.

"What?" Chrissy asked with a shrug. "I thought it was the trashcan."

The class erupted in laughter and Hopper's face turned red with anger. "May I be excused?" Joyce asked, getting a nod from the teacher as she told everyone to settle down.

Joyce quickly grabbed her bag and made her exit, not noticing her camera sliding to the floor in her haste to get out of there.

Thankfully it hit Hopper's shoe when he stood to go after her and carefully scooped it up on his way out of the classroom. "Joyce!" He called when he saw her standing at her locker, struggling to get it open due to her hands shaking.

"Go away...please just leave me alone, Hop." She whispered, not looking at him as she tried her lock for the third time.

"But your cam-."

"Jim!" Hopper was cut off mid-sentence to Chrissy coming up behind them, causing Joyce to turn around. "What are you doing? What is this?" She motioned with her hands to the two of them.

"What am I doing?" He asked sarcastically. "What the hell are you doing Chrissy, Gum? Really? How mature."

Chrissy laughed, a smirk spreading across her face. "So that's what it is huh? You're fucking the trash princess! I couldn't get my head around why you would suddenly leave me after our date. I mean, what other reason is there. Look at me, then look at her." Chrissy pointed her hand at Joyce, popping her hip out for emphasis.

"Chrissy, you don't know what you're talking about. Just go back to class." Hopper instructed not wanting to deal with her bullshit at the moment.

"Why else would you waste your time helping this loser?" Joyce didn't miss the look Chrissy gave her like she was nothing more than a doormat she'd gladly wipe her feet on. "You certainly aren't giving me any, so you must be getting it somewhere."

"Chrissy, I'm warning you. Stop acting like a fucking child. You

clearly have no idea what's going on."

"Oh, I don't?" Chrissy took a step closer, running her hand down his chest. Hopper tried taking a step back, but felt Joyce's locker door hit his shoulders.

"I'm not blind Jim, I've seen you around her locker between classes, and the way you stood up for her in the cafeteria." Once her hand reached his waist, she moved it to his wrist where she rubbed soft circles against his skin with her thumb. "And I bet all the evidence I'll need is right here." Before Hopper knew what was happening, Chrissy snatched Joyce's camera from his hand and took a step back.

"Hey!" Joyce yelled, moving around Hopper to stand between them. "Hand it over." This was the first time Hopper had ever seen Joyce actually stand up for herself and it made his chest tighten. Usually, she chose an easier alternative by avoiding confrontation.

Chrissy shrugged and held out her hand. Which seemed like an easy victory until Joyce almost had it in her grasp and Chrissy purposely let it slip from her fingers, sending it crashing to the floor. The sound of broken glass and plastic echoing through the empty hall.

"Did you really think I was just going to hand it over princess? If that's the case you're just as stupid as the fucking clothes you wear."

Something in Joyce snapped in that moment and she tackled Chrissy to the floor, beating the shit out of her. Joyce had one of her hands in Chrissy's hair, holding her head steady while her other fist connected repeatedly with her face. Joyce didn't even notice Chrissy's blood splashing onto her own face with every hit. She wasn't worried about the cuts on her own hands from Chrissy's teeth, or about the screams of her teachers telling her to break it up. All she craved was vengeance for all the bullshit the whore beneath her had cause for the past six years of her life. She barely felt two strong arms, wrapping around her chest, and pulling her away.

Hopper didn't hesitate to drag her down the hallway, leaving a trail of blood and sneaker prints in their wake. Quickly hauling her into the student bathroom, Hopper locked the door and turned to face the now shaking body in of him.

"Hopper, what the fuck have I done?"

"You just beat the shit out of Chrissy Carpenter, that's what you've done." Hopper pulls her to his chest, trying to help her stop shaking.

"No, no, no," Joyce whispered to herself as her mind started to become more clear.

"Shhhh, It's alright, I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I'll tell the principal or whoever what happened and all this shit is going to fall on Chrissy's shoulders, not yours."

"It's not alright!" Joyce spat, clutching at her chest when he let her go. "I'm so fucked, what the hell is wrong with me?" She questioned, her breaths coming faster and shallower.

Hopper dropped to his knees in front of her when she slid down to the floor and curled in on herself. "Joyce look at me." He demanded, reaching out to take her face in his hands. "Relax."

Joyce shook her head, knocking his hands away. "You don't understand. My dad's gonna kill me." Her breathing picked up even more then, scaring him.

"You have to calm down." He pleaded, rubbing her arms. "I won't let anything happen to you. Besides your dad is still in jail."

In almost an instant Joyce's eyes became hazy as she struggled to get air into her lungs.

"Shit." Hopper grabbed her ankles and pulled her forward, placing himself between her and the wall with her back against him. His hand wrapped around her fingers to remove the death grip on her collar and placed his arm across her chest. "Just breathe." He took in a deep breath, holding her tight enough that she could feel his chest rise. "In and out. Move with me." Another deep breath. "Just like that."

Joyce placed her hands on his thighs and fist his jeans between her fingers, rubbing his skin raw with the constant moving as she fought through her panic attack. "I'm right here, you're ok." He whispered, kissing the top of her head, doing anything to ease her pain.

"Hop..." Her voice barely came through as she gasped for air, her whole body shaking. Keeping his arm across her chest, he sat up a little more and used his free hand to brush sweaty hair from her face.

"Don't talk, just focus on me." His hand rubbed up and down her arm gently. "Take in a deep breath."

And she did, moving in time with his breathing. "Good, do it again." He repeated, continuing this pattern for what seemed like hours before she loosened her grip on his jeans and started getting enough air in her lungs to calm down. When she reached up to place her hand over his and he could no longer feel her heart trying to burst through her ribs, he dropped his head back against the wall and shut his eyes with a sigh.

"Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me." He whispered, squeezing her hand. He'd only seen her have a panic attack one other time and it was absolutely terrifying. If she wasn't currently shaking she'd more than likely feel the tremble in his own body at how uneasy he was.

"Sorry..." She apologized after a minute, her voice full of exhaustion.

He knew she was tired and would have gladly laid there in his arms until the sun went down, but her clothes were soaked with sweat, she was shivering uncontrollably and the bloodstains on his jeans reminded him of her busted knuckles she needed to clean. "Come on." He said, carefully pushing her to stand.

Joyce protested the movement, but stood anyway, suddenly becoming more alert.

"Holy shit, Hop, I beat the fuck out of Chrissy Carpenter." Joyce voiced in awe, not completely sure where the feeling of relief was coming from.

"You're damn right you did. Guess she won't be messing with you anymore."

"Wait... Hopper, your parents are going to be pissed at me!" Joyce swallowed, fearful of what would happen to her if she didn't have their support.

Hopper took hold of her shoulders and made her look at him. They didn't need a repeat of what just happened. "Joyce it's going to be ok, I promise you."

"You can't promise that!" Tears fell down her cheeks when she had no more fight left. She was completely drained and her body had no other way to release the stress she was feeling. "Even if the school doesn't call about your involvement..." She held up her hands then to look at her bloody knuckles. "I can't hide this from them. I don't know what I would do without the three of you and if they make me leave...Hop, I have nowhere else to go." Joyce cried, trying to keep oxygen moving into her lungs. She was just so tired of the bullies, tired of the abuse and tired of trying so hard to better her life just to get shit on over and over again.

Joyce was the strongest person Hopper had ever met and to see her so broken in that moment destroyed him. She had never admitted defeat before. Even after the worst of the beatings, the teasing, the constant stress of going to college, she always hid behind a face of determination. It's one of the things he loved about her. Even when the world was against her she always pushed through.

Taking her hand, he moved them to stand in front of the sink and turned on the faucet. "What you just did to Chrissy proves you're capable of more than you think."

Joyce let him run her hands under the water once it was warm. Rinsing the blood from her knuckles. "I don't know what happened." She whispered, truly surprised by her actions.

"Six years of bullshit is what happened. Chrissy's a bitch and deserved what she got." Hopper rolled her knuckles between his fingers to make sure nothing was broken and carefully cleaned where he assumed her fist hit Chrissy's tooth and tore the skin. That was the only place he could see where she was bleeding so the rest of the blood had to be Chrissy's. "You really did a number on her." He said with a hint of a smile. Proud of her for standing up for herself.

Pounding on the bathroom door made both of them jump and Hopper carefully put Joyce behind his back, making sure whoever was on the other side would have to go through him to get to her.

"Miss Horowitz's father is on the way. Bring her to the office now Mr. Hopper." The principal's voice rang through the door. Hopper felt Joyce go stiff behind him. Turning to face her, he saw the tears once again streaming down her cheeks.

"I thought he was still in jail, dad would have told us if he posted bail." Hopper ran his hands through his hair, feeling the stress rolling off not only him, but Joyce as well.

"It's two o'clock, he's on his lunch break now. What if he posted bail after your dad left?" Her voice is barely above a whisper, her hands already shaking again. "I can't go to the farm Hop, he will kill me, you know what he is capable of! I've never fucked up this bad before."

"You've never fucked up period Joyce, he's the one who's fucked up." Hopper whispers pulling her into his chest.

"I have to go, I need to get my things from the tree house. If I can get out of here before he shows up, I can make a run for it."

The mention of those words had Hopper's heart in his throat.

"What do you mean make a run for it? Joyce, you can't leave Hawkins, you can't leave me! Look, just come with me. Come home with me, we will grab your little box from the treehouse, tell my dad everything and not just what you want him to know. Then he can arrest that shitbag who's been abusing you for years!" Hopper pleads, willing to drop down to his knees and beg if she wants him too.

"You don't get it Hop, he will find me. No matter where I am or who I am with. As soon as he's out of jail again, he's going to want to punish me and you know he will stop at nothing until he does. I am literally-"

Suddenly the door to the bathrooms is busted open, revealing Joyce's father, the principal close behind him.

"Come along Princess, we need to have a talk at home. You've been suspended for the next three days." Her father's overly sweet voice filled the tiled lined room. His concerned father charade may have

the teachers fooled, but he's not fooling Jim.

Standing up to his full height to shield Joyce, Hopper starts a standoff between himself and Joyce's father.

"She didn't do a damn thing wrong and she will not be going anywhere with you." He firmly told her dad, not missing the red tinge that had started to appear above the man's collar.

"I'm sorry son, but are you telling me what I am and aren't going to do with my own daughter?" Travis' thick accent leaked out into the small bathroom.

"You're damn right I-"

Hopper stopped talking when he felt a small pinky finger wrap around his. That was her signal. The signal to let it be before her father tried to hurt him too. Hopper looked down into Joyce's eyes and saw the unmistakable fear there. He also saw determination. She wasn't going to let him get hurt no matter the cost. Joyce quickly squeezed his hand three times in quick succession. Another code they had. Meet at the tree house. She squeezed his hand one last time, before moving from behind him.

He watched as Joyce stepped in front of Travis, her head down, not making eye contact with the man who had been abusing her for years. Hopper doesn't miss the way Joyce flinches as her father gently places his hand on the back of her neck, guiding her out of the bathroom and down the hallway.

"Mr. Hopper, I need to see you in my office." Principal Shepherd states, stepping aside to allow Hopper enough room to pass.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to decline that invitation, Mr. Shepherd. I gotta get home."

Hopper quickly steps around the principal and is running down the hallway and toward the student parking lot as if a life depends on it. He's grabbing for his keys as soon as his truck is in sight. His hands are shaking from a combination of fear and adrenaline so bad he drops them.

"Fuck!" He yells out, trying to find the right one for his truck door on his massive set of keys. Finally finding the right one he shoves it into the lock, throwing his truck door open and climbing inside. He's peeling out of the lot in seconds, not even looking as he pulls onto the main road. He has to get to the station to find his dad. He's the only one who can help Joyce now.

He's doing fifty in a thirty five, praying no one walks out in front of him as he pulls into the front of the Police Station. His dad's blazer is parked neatly in its designated spot. Hopper doesn't even turn his truck off before he's jumping out the door and running inside. Slinging the door open, he startles Flo, his dad's new secretary.

" ! No running in the building!" She calls out after Jim, who is currently busting through the swinging door, eyes scanning the small room for his father.

"Where is he? Where's my dad?" Hopper yells at the officers who are currently sitting around their desks.

"He left about ten minutes ago on a call to old man Henderson's house. What's going on Jim, are you okay?" Mark calls from his desk. He lays his playing cards down and stands.

"No I'm not okay, why is his truck here if he's not? It doesn't matter, I need your radio right now. Right now dammit!" Jim yells as he grabs for Mark's radio.

"Hey kid, knock it off or I'm going to put you in a cell until your old man gets back." Mark states as he smacks Jim's hands away from his shoulder.

"You don't get it! I need to speak to my dad right now Mark!" Jim yells, turning on his heel and quickly stalks to his father's office, grabbing a spare radio off of his desk. He prays it has some kind of charge. Scanning through the various channels, Hopper finally finds channel eleven and begins hurriedly tapping out his family name in Morse code. That was their signal when an emergency was happening. Finally, after repeating this process three times, his dad comes back over the radio.

"Mary? Jim? What's going on? Over." Greg's voice calls back through the channel. Hopper nearly weeps at the sound of his old man's voice.

"Dad, he's got her. We have to go or he's going to kill her! Over." Hopper cries out, praying his dad stays within range.

"Jim what are you talking about, who has who? Over."

"Horowitz, Travis Horowitz posted bail today while you were on lunch. Joyce got in a fight at school and they called him. He picked her up and I don't know where she is! Over!"

The channel is silent for a few seconds, he's sure his father is yelling curses he can't even begin to think of.

"Jim, I need you to go to the tree house son, see if she got away somehow. I'm heading back to the station now. Over." The channel goes silent and Jim throws the radio down on the desk. Running back through the station, he once again startles Flo, who is attempting to make a fresh pot of coffee.

"No running in the station Mr. Hopper!" She yells out with more authority. Hopper doesn't even give her a glance back as he jumps into his truck, throwing it in reverse, and hauling ass toward the farm.

He's running toward the fields the second he's parked in the driveway and doesn't reply when his mother yells out the front door, demanding to know what's going on. He just runs toward the tree house, praying to whatever God that is listening, that she is alive and safe.

6. Chapter 6

Joyce felt her father's hand leave her neck as he opened the door to his truck and not so easily shoved her into the passenger seat, almost closing her hand in the door. Joyce had given up, knowing she was about to get the beating of her life. She flinched when her father climbed up into the driver's side.

"Well well, it looks like you've gotten yourself into a shit situation here princess. Didn't I tell you not to leave the house for any reason?" Travis sneered, putting his truck into reverse and pulling out into the road. Joyce is silent, just wanting to spend her last moments of clarity thinking about Hopper. She's lost in thought, thinking of Halloween night when a hand smacks her face.

"I'm talking to you, young lady!" Travis yells, swerving slightly into the next lane. Joyce remains silent, praying that everything will be over soon and hopefully she'll be able to make a run for it once he's done.

"So you want to play hard to get, is that it?" Travis questions as he reaches out, placing his hand on her upper thigh. What might look like a gentle father's touch at a stoplight was actually killing her. Travis was gripping her thigh so tightly his knuckles were white.

"If you wanted to play, you just had to say the word." He whispers, moving his hand up to Joyce's waist, his finger dipping down underneath the denim at her hip. The feeling of him on her made Joyce's blood run cold. She tried to ignore her racing heart, just wanting to get this done and over with. She was tired of fighting him.

Travis pulls off onto the dirt road that Joyce knows so well. It's the one she's ran down countless times to get away from the man who she calls her father. When the trailer comes into view, she starts to panic. He's out of the truck in seconds, reaching across the cab and grabbing her hair, jerking her out, not caring he's pulling her hair out by the roots. She barely catches her footing before he hauls her up, pressing her against the truck. His hand is around her throat, cutting off her air supply.

"You've had it easy compared to what's to come little one. By the time I'm through with you, that Hopper boy won't be able to recognize who the fuck you are." He slowly reaches down Joyce's right arm, toying with her like a cat does a mouse. He grabs for her small hand, looking over the cuts that were left by Chrissy's teeth.

"So you get into a fight with a girl and end up locked in the bathroom with a guy hanging all over you? What was up with that?" He asks, taking Joyce's pinky between both of his hands. She kept her mouth shut. Knowing if she didn't survive, whatever information she gave would lead him to the Hoppers.

Travis sighed, looking down into his daughter's face. "Looks like we're going to have to do this the hard way." Without hesitation, he bends her pinky sharply back and to the side, causing the bones within to break instantly. Joyce can't help the scream that rips from her lungs.

"Why do you make me hurt you Joyce? You know I do what I do because I love you!" He yells over her screams.

"Now, why don't you be a good girl and do what daddy says. Go inside." He murmurs into her hair. Joyce cradles her pinky to her chest. If this is what he was starting out with, she'd be dead within two hours. Quickly inhaling the last bit of fresh air she probably ever would, Joyce walks up the rickety steps of the porch and into the trailer.

A stench she hasn't smelled in that metal prison smacks her in the face as she opens the door. There's no telling what he has done inside since the last time she was here. Standing in the living room, she tried to breathe through her mouth instead of her nose. She jumps when the front door closes shut, sealing her inside where she knows she's about to be tortured. Travis's hand is on the back of her neck again, forcing her to turn around. She sees his fist before it connects with her left eye. Seeing stars, she drops to her knees. His hand is pulling her hair again, punching her repeatedly on the left side of her face. After three hits, he pushes her away, her face landing on the stained carpet on the floor.

Travis stands straight, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"Now that I've got your attention, tell me, what's been going on with you and the Chief's kid?" He questions, looking down at his hand, inspecting for blood on the back of it.

"Nothing is going on, he just broke up the fight." She breathes, keeping her head on the floor. Travis reaches out, placing her broken pinky under his boot. Stepping down on the bone, willing it to pierce through her skin. She's screaming into the carpet, trying her best not to give him the satisfaction of hearing her.

"I know your lying Joyce, I'm the one who taught you how to do that remember?" He sneers, taking his weight slightly off of her hand.

"You going to tell me the truth now?" He growls, spitting onto the floor near Joyce's head. She doesn't say a word. Travis takes a breath, grabbing her hand and hauls her up, making her stand on her feet. She has a split second to close her eyes before her face is being smacked into the doorframe of the kitchen. A loud crunch radiates through her head, and the sudden feeling of drowning floods her. Warm blood trickles down her nose, coating her lips with the taste of copper. Her head is pounding unbearably as she feels the coldness of his hands around the back of her neck once more. He pulls her head back, causing the flowing blood to drain down into her throat, choking her.

"Ready to talk yet, or do I have to keep pursuing you?" He asks as if this was a normal conversation to be having while beating the shit out of your kid. Joyce stands fast, trying to keep what little dignity she feels she has left.

"Have it your way then." He laughs. "You know I like a challenge, Joyce. You will break, and when you do, I'm going to make you beg me to kill you." He throws her into the corner of the living room, cutting off any escape attempt she may try to make. She hears the sound of his knife, and keys hitting the floor as he unhooks his belt. Giving the worn leather a test crack, he grins, enjoying the way it makes her jump at the noise.

"You're just like one of Pavlov's dogs Princess, you hear the sound of my belt and it instantly makes you shiver." Joyce can't see out of her left eye, whether it's because of it swelling shut, or the constant flow

of blood pouring into it she doesn't know. She feels the agonizing snap of his belt against her shoulders, causing her to fall to her knees. He strikes her, five times in quick succession, all his hits landing on the back of her ribs. Her skin is stinging more than it has since the first time he hit her. He hasn't done this in weeks, giving her skin time to heal before being brought back into the hell she was accustomed to. He deals four more lashes, the buckle of his belt scratching into her skin. That's when she hears it. Hoppers' voice, only its in her head. "Joyce, do you have any idea how hard it is to pretend that you don't exist? I love you, more than anything, I'm not going to let anyone hurt you anymore. Come on Joyce, fight, Fight for, me, for us!

Travis grabs her by her ankles, pulling her into the center of the room. He climbs on top of her, his hands lifting her shirt up to her navel. He grabs for the button of her jeans.

Pulling strength from Hopper's voice in her head, Joyce quickly sits up, connecting her forehead with his. Travis sits back on his heels immediately, allowing Joyce to bring up her legs and kick him as hard as she can in the face. She hears the most satisfying sound in the world, bones breaking. She quickly scrambles for traction and stumbles toward her bedroom. Slamming and locking the door she makes her way to her window, thankful he hadn't had a chance to board it up yet. She cried out in agony as she raises the window, the pressure on what is left of her pinky unbearable. Going head first she tumbles out the window, landing on her shoulder. The muffled sound that fills her ear is quickly noted and she climbs to her feet, her right arm now useless, she can feel the disconnection between her shoulder and its intended socket.

"Get back here you fucking bitch!" She hears Travis scream as the faint sounds of sirens swell in the distance. She's not taking a chance on him catching her. Running as fast as she can, she tears through the woods, branches slashing her in the face as she runs. Joyce's foot connects with an upended root and causes her to fall. She's cradling her right arm to her chest with what fingers she still has function over on her left.

She's late. Joyce should be here by now. Hopper is pacing inside the treehouse, not able to stand still to save his life. He repeatedly pops

his knuckles, a habit he's picked up for when he becomes nervous. He doesn't even have the concentration to light a cigarette as he paces.

"Fuck this." He says, swinging open the hatch on the treehouse and quickly climbing down the ladder. The moment his boots hit the ground, he's running for the treeline. Not giving a damn that his shirt is getting ripped to shreds on random low hanging branches. Crossing the fields and woods between the treehouse and the Horowitz trailer in record time, he dips down the small trail that Joyce uses when she comes to the treehouse. He doesn't realize just how far he's run until the old tree that covers the trail comes into view. Quickly hurtling himself over it, Hopper is airborne for two seconds before he's on the ground on the other side. Something moves ahead on the trail and he stops breathing. She's battered, bloody, and currently trying to pick herself up off the trail.

"Joyce!" He screams, sliding suddenly to a stop in front of her. He's on his knees, pulling her to him. Her nose is crooked, and he can't pinpoint where the blood is still flowing from on her face.

"Hop...following...he's..." The words are barely pushed passed Joyce's bleeding lips before his instincts kick in.

Reaching down, he pulls her into his arms and his heart breaks when she lets out a painful cry at his slight touch.

"I know it hurts honey I'm sorry. You just gotta hold on okay? Just hold onto me." His voice cracks as he adjusts his hold on her and begins to sprint toward the one place Travis can't touch them. His home.

Hopper is dodging limbs and stumps all the way back to the farm and Joyce has become less responsive to his attempts at conversation. She hadn't said a word in three minutes. He nearly weeps when the horse barn comes into view.

"We're almost there Joy." He calls looking down into his arms. The sight of her makes his knees grow weak. The blood on her face has dried, and the swelling has increased. Her left eye is barely open as she glances up at him unable to focus on his face.

Making it past his dad's Blazer, Hopper is screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Mom, Dad, I need help! Help her please!" His anguished scream fills the yard as he steps onto the porch, his knees buckling from exhaustion. His parents run onto the front porch and Hopper doesn't miss his mother bringing her hand to cover her mouth in shock.

"Jesus Jim." His father cries, as he rushes to his son's side. The fear that is in his father's eyes is enough to make the tears Hopper has been trying to hold back since finding her fall onto his cheeks.

"I'll call an ambulance." His mother voices, turning to run into the house.

"Did Travis do this Jim?" Greg asks as he tries to take Joyce from his arms. Hopper is reluctant, afraid that she is going to stop breathing once she doesn't feel his touch anymore.

"Come on son I can't help her until she's on the porch." His father instructs as Hopper slowly nods and relinquishes his hold on her.

Hopper watches as she struggles to swallow. Her gaze now roaming the ceiling of the porch.

"Go get my radio son and the first aid kit." Greg instructed as he began to take a mental note of Joyce's injuries. It's not until Hopper reaches for her hand that he notices her pinky. The one she held his with in the bathroom is laying at an unnatural angle.

"The bastard broke her pinky!" Hopper cries at his father's side.

"That pinky is the least of our problems Jim, get my radio, now!"

"No need, I got it." His mother's voice calls from the screen door.

"David and two units are at the trailer now, Travis took off into the woods. They're looking for him." Mary informs her husband who is now standing at Joyce's side.

"Mary, I need you to stay here with the kids, I'm going to find that fucking bastard if it's the last thing I do. Jim, come here son, I need

your help." Hopper does as he's instructed. Watching his dad lift Joyce's limp neck from the porch almost kills him.

"Son, I need you to sit right here, come on, place your thigh under her head. Watch her breathing and try and keep her talking, do whatever you have to do take keep her awake." Hopper nods, running his hand over the top of Joyce's head. His stomach rolls when he notices clumps of her hair coming away with the touch.

With those instructions, Greg is off the porch and heading to his blazer, his slightly untucked uniform shirt billowing behind him. He slings gravel and dirt in his haste to get to the trailer.

Glancing in his rearview mirror, he watches the three most important people in his life huddle together on his porch. He had never wanted to kill another man in his life, but he guessed that the old saying was true, there's always a first time for everything.

"Patient is Joyce Horowitz, a seventeen-year-old female, broken nose, dislocated right shoulder, blunt force trauma to the head and possible rib fractures. Broken pinky on her right hand." The EMT called ahead on his radio the moment Joyce was loaded into the ambulance. Hopper recognized the driver as Anthony O'Malley, a guy about six years older than him. Hopper held his mother's hand as they watched the paramedic take Joyce's vitals.

Hopper takes his other hand and places it on Joyce's knee, praying she can tell he's there.

"Come on Joyce don't do this to me, you have to fight." Hopper pleads, as his mother rubs soothing circles on his back.

"Y'all might want to cover your ears for this, it's going to make one hell of a sound." The EMT announced as he carefully picked up Joyce's injured hand.

"Wait, isn't that going to hurt like hell?" Hopper questioned, trying to keep Joyce from having unnecessary pain.

"Buddy, she's here right now, but her mind's not. It shut down to protect her from her trauma and It's better if I fix it now while she's

out. I promise it's going to hurt worse if we wait."

"Come on honey, let him so his job." Mary soothes, pulling Hopper's head to lay on her shoulder. Using her other hand, she covers his ears and closes her eyes. It takes less than a minute for Joyce's finger to be reset and taped to her ring finger.

"We're pulling in now." O'Malley calls into the radio, alerting the hospital staff to be on the ready. The ambulance stops suddenly and before Hopper can stand up, the doors are being swung open and a swarm of medical personnel are already removing Joyce's stretcher from the ambulance. Rushing through the hospital doors, Hopper is at Joyce's side.

"Come on Joy, you have to fight, I can't lose you." He pleads with her, not even knowing if she can hear him. A hand on his shoulder stops him as they pass through a set of double doors.

"Son I can't let you go any further, I'm going to need you to take a seat out in the lobby for me okay?"

"Please, I need to know she's okay!" Hopper begs, not giving a damn that everyone in the emergency department can hear him crying.

"I can't allow it Jim and you know that. Now go on, If I hear anything before your dad gets here, I'll radio him okay?" It's not until Hopper hears mention of his father that he focuses on the man who is blocking him from following Joyce. It's Mark, his dad's second in command. "Jim, I promise you, you'll do nothing but get in the way back there. Besides your mom is pretty shook up, I think she needs you more than Joyce does at the moment."

"Wait, if you're here, that means..."

"Yeah, Travis is here too. Apparently, she broke his nose. Your girls a fighter Jim."

"Bastard deserves to have his neck broke." Hopper growls, wanting more than ever to make his way into the back hallways of the hospital.

"I agree son, that's why I'm going to let your father do the talking

once he gets here. But for now, I need you to sit down, go smoke a cigarette or something and let those doctors save her life okay?"

Running his hands through his hair, Jim steps away from Mark, heading down the hallway toward the emergency room waiting area. "Guess mom was going to find out my smoking habit sooner or later." He mumbled to himself as he motioned for her to follow him outside.

The sound of boots approaching makes Travis raise his head. The curtain dividing his small cubicle from the next is pulled back by none other than Greg Hopper.

"How's it going Chief, long time no see!" Travis calls, attempting to wave, although both of his hands are handcuffed to his bed. Greg doesn't say a word as he walks over to Travis's bedside. Pulling out a rolling stool from a nearby desk, he sits, close enough to feel Travis's breath on his face.

"How's my girl doing out there? She still kicking? Shame she got away before I could teach her how to be a true lady." Travis chuckles to himself, no longer giving a damn what he says to anyone.

"They treating you good in here Horowitz?" Greg asked, looking around the small room.

"Treating me just fine. Doc came in, reset my nose and I'm assuming you're here to give me my slap on the wrist?"

Greg runs his hands over his face before giving Travis a sweet smile. Moving faster than Travis thought he could, Greg's fist connected with his freshly set nose, making the bone dislodge again. Before Travis can even scream, Greg has his hands around the man's throat.

"You listen here you son of a bitch. Joyce is my girl. You hear me? She is my daughter, and I have been a better father to her than you could ever dream of being. You best believe that I'll be calling in every favor I can when you go to prison. With any luck, you'll be dead in a week." Greg hissed. Squeezing Travis's throat one more time for good measure, he let go, wiping the blood from Travis's freshly broken nose onto his already disgusting shirt.

"If I even hear of you even thinking about Joyce again, I'll kill you myself is that clear?" Greg warns as he grasps the curtain divider in his hand. For once, Travis Horowitz didn't have a damn thing to say.

Hopper is on his third cigarette when he looks up to see his father making his way toward him and his mother. Quickly taking one last drag, he drops the butt and crushes it under his boot.

"Dad is she okay? Please tell me she's okay!" Jim's pleading to his father and Greg doesn't say a word as he pulls his son into a tight hug.

"I don't know son, they haven't told me anything." Greg whispers as he feels Jim begin to shake in his arms.

"I can't lose her dad, I love her. She's the one. I know I sound crazy, but she's it!" Jim cries into his father's shoulders, Greg's arms are the only thing holding him up.

"All we can do is wait and pray." Greg looks to his wife, knowing she's thinking the same thing he is. Either their son's heart is going to be broken beyond repair in the next few hours, or it's going to become fiercely protective of the girl he's going to marry.

A hand is gently shaking Greg awake. Coming back to consciousness, he realizes a doctor is standing in front of him. He motions for Greg to follow him and as carefully as he can, he slides his arm out from under Mary, who has Jim's head laying in her lap. Following the doctor to a small side room, Greg is prepared for the worst.

"Mr. Hopper, I'm Dr. Perkins, head of trauma. I was told to report Miss. Horowitz condition to you. Am I correct?"

"Yeah that's correct, how bad is she?" Greg is straight to the point.

"Chief, I'm not going to bullshit you, that girl is lucky to be alive. Two of her ribs were fractured, her shoulder dislocated, broken nose and pinky. Not to mention the beating she took. If your son hadn't found her when he did, she wouldn't be here right now."

Greg is running his hand through his hair, pacing in the small room. "She's going to be okay though right? She's going to make it?"

"She's going to be extremely sore for at least the next month, and it wouldn't surprise me if she had some form of PTSD, but yes, she's going to make it."

Relief floods Greg's body. He hasn't been this tore up since Mary's blood pressure dropped when she was in labor.

"Thank you so much Doc, when can we see her?"

"I can take y'all back now if you'd like. I have to warn you though, there is considerable bruising, and swelling. We have her sedated for the pain and depending on her vitals, we should be able to wake her up over the next day or so. I'll wait here while you gather your family."

Greg nods as he leaves the room, carefully waking Mary and Jim to follow him back down the hallway toward the patients rooms.

Hopper didn't recognize the woman in the hospital bed before him. Her face is so swollen it looks like it's about to burst. Her right arm is in a sling, her pinky is in a tiny brace, taped to her ring finger, and the bruises are the worst he has ever seen. But she's breathing. The sight of her chest rising and falling is the most beautiful thing Hopper has ever seen. He's not listening as Dr. Perkins talks to his parents, he's just watching her. I promise Joyce, I'm not going to leave your side.

He feels his dad standing behind him, then a hand on his shoulder.

"We're going to go back to the house and get a few things for Joyce. When we come back, I want you to go home. Take a shower, and try to get some sleep okay?" Hopper nods, still not taking his eyes off of Joyce.

"I promise you son, he's going to pay for this."

7. Chapter 7

Mary tiptoed into Joyce's room, finding Jim fast asleep, his body leaning onto the side of Joyce's bed. He hadn't left Joyce's side in the six hours she had been away. Mary brought her hand down onto her son's shoulder, gently coaxing him awake.

"Jim honey, wake up. Come on bud, sit up."

Hopper opened his eyes and quickly sat up, looking at Joyce.

"Is she still okay?" He questioned, still disoriented from sleep.

"She's fine Jim. Go on home and get some sleep. I'll stay here with her. Your dad is at the house."

"I'm fine mom, really. I'm going to stay here." Hopper stated, running his hands over his face.

"Jim, you can't take care of her if you run yourself down. I'm staying here with her. If anything happens I promise I'll call. Do you want me to have Mark take you home or can you drive?"

"You're really going to make me go, mom?" Hopper questions, stretching in his chair.

"Yes, sir I am. You can drive or I can have someone take you. But you need sleep, food and a shower." She scolds, attempting to scoot his chair back from the bed.

"Alright, alright I'll drive. You got my keys?" Before the words are completely out of his mouth, Mary is dangling his keys from her fingers. Watching her son stand up, Mary notices how much taller he has grown in the past three years. He bends over Joyce, gently placing a kiss to the top of her head. This was the first time Mary had ever seen her son show any physical affection toward the young woman she considered her daughter.

"I'll be back in a few hours mom okay? Just call if anything changes and I'll be back in a hurry." Jim states as he grabs the keys from his mother's hand. Stopping at the door for one last look at Joyce,

Hopper reluctantly leaves her side.

Hopper has to force himself to walk up the steps of his porch. He's not sure who washed Joyce's blood away from the wood beneath his feet, but the porch looks freshly cleaned and smells faintly of bleach. Carefully opening the front door, he walks inside, automatically sliding his boots off to leave by the rug. A light coming from the kitchen makes him stop and do a double-take. He figured his dad would be in bed at this time.

Walking to the kitchen, he finds his dad sitting at the table, Joyce's black box beside him. Countless pictures of Joyce's bruised and bloody body are scattered out in front of Greg who is sitting motionless, staring at a photo of Joyce pinched between his thumb and pointer finger.

"Dad?" Jim calls, walking into the kitchen. His voice brings Greg out of whatever thoughts are running through his head and he can tell his dad has been crying, the redness of his eyes proof.

"A one-time thing Jim?" He whispers, placing the photo back onto the table.

"You went to the tree house?" Jim questions from where he's standing.

"Yeah, the majority of her clothes and stuff are there. Then I realized that if she took all those pictures of the good times with you, she probably took them of the bad times as well. So I did some snooping and found this box. Also seen your .22 was off the rack. What was that about?"

"Joyce saw a flashlight in the woods one night. She knew it wasn't any of us, so she got it down just in case it was him." Jim admits as he takes a seat beside his father. They are quiet for a minute, Greg moving the photos in front of him around to look at the various stages of Joyce's tortured life.

"If I had told you, she would have stopped coming to the tree house

dad. I couldn't let her stay at the trailer after everything he was doing to her. She made me promise not to say anything." Jim sighed.

Greg's hand suddenly slams down on the table, making him jump. "Do you see this Jim!? All of this could have been avoided the first god damn time if you would have just come to me for help! I could have arrested that son of a bitch and she wouldn't have been hurt like this!" Greg screams in anger. Anger that he's not sure is directed toward the kids or himself. "I've always suspected there was more, but I trusted you to tell me!"

"I was trying to protect her!" Jim counters, trying to keep his voice level. "What was I supposed to do? Tell you, have Travis arrested and then have the entire town talk about her? She gets enough of that shit at school as it is, why would I add even more to her plate?"

Letting his words sink in, Jim waits for his father to calm down. Finally, Greg speaks as he rubbed his temples.

"I don't know how she has survived all these years dealing with this. She must have been in constant pain. Not to mention she was keeping good grades in school and helping you out around here. I just..." Greg stops speaking, at a loss for words.

"She's too tough and stubborn for her own good dad, I know. I took all of those photos. You don't know how often I begged her to tell you or mom, or anybody who could help. But she insisted she didn't want to be a burden. No matter how many times I told her she wasn't." Jim finishes.

Sighing, Greg stands and makes his way over to the fridge. Pulling out two bottles of beer, he hands one to Jim, who carefully takes it in his hand.

"Oh come on Jim, if you can drink what was left of that Whiskey, then you can share a beer with your old man."

Jim nods before opening the beer with his shirt. Taking a sip, he makes a face and sits the bottle on the counter. Greg is trying his best not to laugh as he too sat back down.

"So if you took all of these photos, would you be able to help me make a timeline? I need to see if there are any patterns here, see how the beatings progressed." Greg states, moving the photos around so they aren't laying on top of each other.

"Do you think you'll be able to have him convicted dad?"

"With all this evidence, his priors and what happened today with Joyce, there's no way he's getting out of prison this time. The sooner we get everything in order, the sooner we can make him disappear."

Pain. Everywhere, it's all Joyce can feel. She attempts to open her eyes, but only one of them follows her command. She tries to sit up to no avail and she starts to panic as memories of her father come flooding back to her. Somewhere, a beeping is becoming faster. A shuffle of feet come beside her.

"Joyce, honey it's okay, I'm here, you're safe." She hears Mary's familiar voice. Looking to her right, she sees the closest thing to a mother she has ever had. "You're in the hospital darlin, but everything is going to be okay. Just try not to move, you've got a lot of things holding you together. I'm going to go get the doctor, just sit tight." Joyce tries to speak, but her words come out in a hoarse mess.

"Shhhhhh, don't speak honey, just save your energy, I'll be right back." In a flash Mary is out of her line of sight. Panicking, Joyce tries to take an inventory of her body.

An unfamiliar face came into her line of sight, making her heart rate increase. It's not until she sees Mary over the mystery man's shoulder, that Joyce realizes he's a doctor.

"Joyce, I'm doctor Perkins, I'm taking care of you this evening, can you follow my finger with your eyes?" Joyce does as she is asked, carefully following the doctor's finger. Reaching down, he takes Joyce's left hand in his.

"I need you to squeeze my hand as hard as you can, come on squeeze, squeeze, squeeze, there we go." He encourages as Joyce focuses what

little strength she has into squeezing his hand.

"Alright, now I'm going to listen to your lungs is that okay? Squeeze my hand two times for yes." She squeezes twice, knowing he is just doing his job. Joyce jumps when the cold stethoscope touches her skin. The room is silent with the exception of their breathing.

"Good, alright Joyce, I know you're in pain and I promise we're going to give you a little something to help with that, but not as powerful as what you have been on okay? Now. Mrs. Hopper is still here with you, if you are in any discomfort, just give her hand a squeeze and she will get one of the nurses or myself." Joyce nodded, already feeling exhausted from the little movement she's done.

"Mom? Is she awake?" Jim's voice fills the room. Before Joyce can turn her head, he is at her side.

"Oh god, Joyce, I was so worried about you." He starts to cry as he leans down and places a kiss to her hair. His hand is gently touching her head and Joyce feels like she is going to cry in relief that he's okay.

Putting a straw to Joyce's lips, Hopper helps her drink.

"How long have I been here?" Her raspy voice barely above a whisper.

"Three days. I'm not gonna lie Joy, I thought I'd lost you." Hopper confesses, pulling a chair up beside the bed.

"What happened? Where's Travis? I remember jumping out of my window and running, and he was trying to follow me."

"You don't have to worry about him ever again darlin, Greg is taking care of everything now." Mary's voice comes from her other side.

Joyce starts to get that anxious feeling in her stomach. If Greg was handling everything that means the police were involved, which became a matter of public record. The whole town was going to know what happened.

"Joy it's okay, Dad had Judge Cooper seal the case file. No one is

going to know anything we don't want them to." Hopper soothed, trying to keep her as calm as possible.

"Don't you worry bout a thing. We've got you Joyce. Now I'm going downstairs to get a cup of coffee, I'll be back in about thirty minutes or so." Mary informed the two as she got to her feet and patted Joyce on her knee.

When she's out the door, the tears Joyce has been holding back start to fall. Hopper was safe. Greg and Mary were safe, that was all she could ever ask for.

"Joyce what's wrong? Are you in pain?" Hopper frantically asks, already making his way to the door to grab a nurse.

"I'm fine Hop, can you just...can you hold me for a while, please?" Joyce questions, trying to scoot over in the hospital bed.

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Please Hop, I just want you close."

Giving in to what he knows is going to get him into trouble, Hopper agreed. Scooting Joyce over as carefully as he can, he crawls into bed with her. Laying on his side, he gently places one arm under Joyce's head, the other over her stomach.

"I don't know what I would have done if something worse would have happened to you." He whispers as Joyce sighs at the feel of him.

"I don't know what I would have done either Hop." She snuggles her head onto his shoulder, careful not to hurt her bruised face. Feeling completely safe for the first time she can remember, Joyce closed her eyes and just laid with him.

Mary, along with Greg, returned about an hour later wanting to give their kids as much time together as possible, so they had a quick lunch. Upon opening the door to Joyce's room, the Hoppers were struck with a beautiful sight. Jim and Joyce were fast asleep in bed. Jim's arms were protectively wrapped around Joyce, their hands folded together.

A week passed before Joyce was able to return to the farm she called home. Obviously, all three Hopper's refused her pleas to stay in the tree house.

"Absolutely not young lady. There's no way for you to climb that ladder without hurting yourself and it's twenty six degrees outside! Not to mention we've already had flurries and it's on the second week of November! You're staying in the house and that's final."

Joyce waited until Mary's back was turned before she rolled her eyes. Catching Hopper smiling at her, Joyce cracked a painful grin herself.

"Will you at least let me help clean, or with chores or something? I feel useless just sitting here like a potato." She protested, not used to being babied.

"You can help by staying in the bed or on the couch. Jim only has one week left of school before Thanksgiving and then it's time to decorate for Christmas."

"Do you know if Dad is going to be participating in the Christmas parade this year?" Jim questioned, wanting to steer the conversation away from chores and cleaning.

"I figure he's going to, he's been keeping out of the public eye lately working on the case. It would do him some good to throw some candy and wave at the kids." Sliding a pancake on the plate in front of Joyce, Mary continues her spill about Thanksgiving menus and outdoor Christmas decorations.

It's a quarter till eight when Hopper stands up from the table. Joyce hates this time of the morning now. He leaves for school and she has to spend the next eight hours without him by her side.

"Come on Joyce it's not that bad, I'll be home before you know it. Besides, you get to hang out with mom. I'm super jealous honestly." He teases, placing his plate in the sink. Jim goes to Joyce's side, placing a quick kiss to her temple.

"Have a good day and I'll see you soon okay? Love you." He

whispered into her ear, not wanting his mother to hear him say those words just yet. Joyce gives his hand a squeeze before mouthing those words back to him. She watches as he places a kiss on his mother's cheek before grabbing his keys and leaving for the day.

"Well Joyce, I'm just going to be piddling around the house today, you're more than welcome to sit down here or you can hang out in Jim's room, whatever you want to do." Mary makes small talk as she begins to wash the dishes from breakfast.

"If it's okay with you I may just lay in bed and read. Jim got a new book from the library for me and it's pretty amazing." Joyce grins, thinking about the blooming love of her current fictional interests.

"That's perfectly fine dear, if you need anything at all just yell for me okay?"

Joyce nods as she places her plate in the sink and heads up the steps. Maybe she can clean the bathroom or something upstairs when Mary isn't around.

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The drive to school for Hopper was a quiet one. It had been a little over a week since the fight between Joyce and Chrissy. Obviously, with a small town like Hawkins, gossip about fights was a continued topic for months. This would be his fourth day back at school when all he wanted to do was be at home with Joyce. Pulling into the student parking lot, Hopper noticed Chrissy's corvette, parked close to his usual spot. Guess Hawkins golden girl was back in her daddy's good graces. Throwing his truck in park, Hopper got out, adjusting his coat and ignoring the tiny snow flurries that had begun to fall.

His day went about like normal. Three classes, followed by lunch. He ignored the whispers as he walked the hallway and tried his best not to listen to the outrageous theories of why Joyce has yet to return to school. They varied from her being committed for beating the shit out of Chrissy, to her moving away from Hawkins. Grabbing a sandwich and a chocolate milk from the line, Hopper snuck out the back door of the cafeteria, a cigarette calling his name.

His and Joyce's spot under the bleachers was lonelier than ever and he missed her like crazy. More than any sane man should miss a woman who was barely seven miles down the road. Bringing a camel to his lips, he quickly inhaled, letting the smoke fill his lungs. The flurries that had been falling this morning had grown in size, becoming huge white snowflakes. Pulling the hood of his coat up around his neck, he crushed out his cigarette under his boot, dreading going to biology where he would have to sit with Chrissy and work on that stupid project.

He made it to class before she did. Taking his seat, he crossed his arms over his chest, already feeling the tension in his shoulders. When she walked in the room, Chrissy acted like she didn't have a care in the world and sat down beside Hopper, reapplying her pink lipstick.

Hopper felt her staring at him before she spoke.

"So that's it huh? You're just going to ignore me for days and not even apologize over what that boyfriend stealing whore did?" Chrissy asked loud enough for people directly around them to hear.

Rolling up the sleeves of his flannel, Hopper turned his body every so slightly to face Chrissy.

"There's nothing for me to apologize about. You were being a bitch and Joyce handed your ass to you on a silver platter."

He didn't miss the inhale of his classmates, all of which were waiting on Chrissy's response.

"You're seriously going to sit there and defend the trash Princess, who not only broke one of my teeth, but completely bruised my face and have the nerve to call me a bitch?" Her voice rose in volume.

"Yeah I am. Because you are. You've been harassing Joyce for six years. You all have been." He addressed his classmates. "When you broke her camera all that anger she's been holding in finally broke free. So yeah, I'm going to defend her. You're nothing but a bully Chrissy and in the end, karma always comes around. That goes for all of you." He stated before facing the front of the class, his hands

folded on his chest. Their biology professor chose that moment to enter the classroom, silencing the whispers that were escaping from the mouths of his peers. Just one more hour and he would be heading back home to Joyce.

Joyce stood at the front door, watching Mary drive down the driveway as she headed toward the grocery store for some last minute provisions in case the snow really started to come down. Joyce gave her an entire minute after pulling out onto the main road before she was making her way to the horse barn. If she wasn't allowed to do anything to help out while Mary was there, she would do what she could when she wasn't. Opening the barn door, Joyce greeted the horses, all of which would be needing a blanket on their backs tonight.

After rubbing four different noses, Joyce grabbed the brushes from the far wall and headed toward the first stall. She finished the first horse and ignored the exhaustion she was already feeling with such a little task.

A sudden chill ran down the back of her neck when she felt like she was being watched. Putting her back to the stall door, she searches the barn, looking for something she could use to defend herself with in her non dominant hand since her right arm was still useless. Finally her eyes landed on a hatchet and her heartbeat began to quicken. Her fight or flight reflex having a battle inside her body. The sound of quickly approaching footsteps met her ears and she raised the hatchet in front of her, ready to defend herself if necessary. Suddenly the barn door opens, revealing a very sleep deprived Greg.

"Jesus Joyce, what are you doing with that thing?" He asks stepping into the barn and closing the door to block out the weather. Greg notices her quick breathing and defensive posture. Holding his hands up in front of him, he takes a step back from her.

"It's okay, I'm sorry if I snuck up on you or anything. Just breath darlin." He instructs, not wanting her to go into a panic attack on his account. Joyce is still standing, hatchet at the ready.

"Joyce honey, you know I'm not going to hurt you. Just put the hatchet down, we can go back into the house and warm up a bit before dinner."

Joyce begins to take control of her breathing, her mind slowly coming back to her once more. She moved carefully, not trusting herself to outright lay the hatchet down.

"Mr. Hopper I'm so sorry." She begins to cry once her weapon of choice is safely on the ground. Greg's heart breaks for the broken girl in front of him and with his hands still up, he walks toward her, eventually pulling the girl into his arms. He breathes a sigh of relief when she returns the hug.

"Shhh it's okay honey, you have nothing to be sorry about. It's natural for you to be jumpy. It's just a sign that you've been stronger than you should have had to be."

A small groan escapes Joyce's lips when her shoulder starts to cause her discomfort from being held and Greg is quick to let her go.

"Come on darlin, lets get inside before Jim gets home." Greg says, leading Joyce away from the horse barn. Walking beside the man she considered a father, Joyce made her way back to the house just as Mary's car was pulling down the driveway.

"Let's keep this between me and you okay?" Greg states as Mary opens her car door.

"Please tell me she wasn't out trying to do chores?" Joyce hears Mary ask as she loads Greg's arms full of groceries.

"Nah darlin, she was just out walking around with me. I needed to check on the horses before the weather got too bad."

Mary eyes him suspiciously, but didn't say a word as Joyce holds open the front door, allowing The Hoppers to file into the kitchen and begin to unload the groceries. The sound of the front door opening again grabs Joyce's attention. Turning to the right, she sees Jim, a tired smile on his face.

"Hey everybody, what's going on?" He questions, making a beeline for

Joyce's side. His hand is in hers in seconds, giving it two quick squeezes. I love you their code said. Joyce was so relieved to have him back at her side that she didn't notice the pile of school work he had placed on the table.

"These are for you. It should keep you occupied for a few hours at least." He grins, going to the fridge to grab some milk.

"Jim you better not drink out of that carton." Mary scolds from her spot near the sink where she's already starting to make dinner.

"Come on Joy, I can help you with your homework upstairs so we're not in moms way." Jim called, gathering Joyce's work in his hands. Once inside his room, he flopped down onto his bed.

"I never realized how much school sucks when I can't look forward to seeing you during the day." Hopper says to Joyce who was carefully sitting down at the foot of the bed.

"I'm sure it wasn't that bad Hop, it's the same as every other day."

"But it wasn't. I kept catching myself looking for you in the hallway when I knew good and damn well you were here at home."

"At least you didn't have to worry about people making fun of me."

"I don't know if I'm going to have to worry about that anymore. Chrissy tried talking to me today and I set her straight. In front of the whole class." He said proudly.

"You did what!?" Joyce exclaimed, moving closer to his side. She watched as his hand reached for her and landed on her upper thigh, where he soothingly ran it up and down her jeans before speaking again.

"It was nothing Joyce I promise. You don't have to worry about anything." Hopper sat up, resting his back against the headboard of his bed. "Come here, it's been a long day and I just want to hold you for a little bit."

Not being able to resist his plea, Joyce moved the best she could into his arms and laid her head on his chest. After a few minutes, she slid

her uninjured hand under his shirt and lightly raked her fingertips over his tight abs, sides and chest as she closed her eyes and just relaxed. They laid that way for a while, Joyce just allowing herself to feel the man she had been missing all day, finding the whole thing oddly soothing.

When she finally stopped her movements, Hopper pouted with a groan. She smiled and opened her eyes, instantly noticing the undeniable bulge pressed against his jeans.

"Seriously Hop?" She huffed playfully.

He didn't move, his eyes still closed. "What?"

"You choose now to get a hard on?"

He shifted and looked down at his pants, a smirk on his face. "Yep."

Joyce slapped his arm. "What if your parents walk in here?"

"Well what do you want me to do Joyce? Cut it off?" He asked, rolling his eyes with a laugh. "I can't help it. You touching me feels good, geez."

Joyce took it upon herself to really mess with him then, since he wanted to be a smart ass. Two could play that game. Doing something she'd never done before, she bit her lip and reached down, sliding the palm of her hand over the front of his jeans. The sudden movement caused him to jump and he was quick to put his hand over hers. Shocked at her for making such a bold move.

Swallowing, he attempted to find his voice. "Joyce...you..."

Joyce gave him a mischievous grin and squeezed her fingers around him harder, feeling him twitch. A flood of arousal shook through her body at how big and hard he was under her palm, the only thing separating their touch just a few layers of fabric.

Sucking in a breath, Hopper bit the inside of his cheek nervously. He was about to grab her chin and pull her in for a kiss when he heard someone on the stairs. "Stop, stop..." He choked out, caught off guard when she started moving her hand back and forth against him.

Quickly adjusting himself, he sat up more with his knees bent, watching his dad walk past the open door and toward his bedroom without giving them a second thought.

Hopper sighed, rubbing his hand through his hair. "Jesus Joyce. You can't tease me like that."

Joyce giggled, looking cute as hell curled around her pillow staring up at him. "Why not?" She blinked at him innocently.

Scooting down further so he was laying on his side, eye level with her, he brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "Because one day I'm not going to stop you and I really don't want to come in my pants like a thirteen year old."

"You could just take your pants off you know..." Joyce raised her brow and grinned at the look he gave her.

Before she knew what was happening, Hopper squeezed her leg right above her knee, using just enough pressure to make it tickle. "Be careful what you ask for Joyce, because as soon as you're better, I'm going to have my way with you." He threatened playfully.

Joyce laughed and shoved his hand away. "Oh really?"

"Really." He smiled, leaning forward to give her a kiss.

8. Chapter 8

A slamming door was never a good sign. A slamming door in the Hopper household meant that shit was about to go down. Mary stood from the kitchen table, completely forgetting the recipe book in front of her and before she could make the hallway, Greg was in front of her, his face redder than a tomato.

"Greg whats going on?" She questioned, never having seen her husband in such a state. He passes her, heading toward the cabinet above the fridge. Also never a good sign. Greg brings down a bottle of scotch, not bothering with a glass and takes a long sip straight from the bottle. Coming up for a breath, he turns to face Mary who now has her hands on her hips.

"You going to tell me what's going on or are you going to make me guess?"

"Where are the kids?" He asks, moving to sit at the kitchen table. Mary joins him, placing her hand on top of his.

"They went to check on the tree house. They haven't been there since Halloween. Now tell me what's going on Greg." Mary demands, not liking the anger that's rolling off of her husband is waves.

"That bastard is trying to say he never touched Joyce. That he hasn't seen her in weeks. Which I know for a fact is a damn lie, because she was at the trailer when I arrested him for failure to appear. He's saying she wasn't at the trailer when he nearly beat her to death and for some strange reason, the judge is actually willing to hear his side of the story even though everyone knows he's a boldface liar. Mary, you didn't see him... He had blood covering his hands, his shirt... I've never been so happy to see a man with a broken nose in my life. Then he has the balls to say he didn't touch her? He's just ashamed a seventeen-year-old half his size broke his nose." Greg finishes in a rush. Allowing him a few seconds to breathe, Mary begins to formulate a plan.

"Honey, you're going to have to ask her for help. Jim too, I know both of them want to see that bastard behind bars just as much as

you do. It's going to hurt like hell for both of them and there's no doubt about that, but you have to clean and stabilize a wound before it begins to heal. The cleaning is always the most painful part, but the relief you feel afterwards makes the pain worth it in the end." Mary reaches for her recipe book and turns to the section on entrees. "What do you say to a chicken pie for dinner?"

"See, I told you Joyce, nothing to worry about. The tree house is still standing." Hopper laughs as their beloved hideaway comes into view. Joyce lets out an audible sigh. It had been three weeks since she had last been to the treehouse. Three full weeks of sleeping in Hoppers' warm and comfortable bed, which she would gladly take that over a cold couch any day. Placing her foot on the bottom run, Joyce attempted to begin her climb, but was stopped when Hopper's hand touched her.

"Are you sure you can climb up there? I don't want you getting hurt." He stated, coming to stand behind her in case she begins to fall.

"I'm fine Hop, I'm out of that sling and all I have is this stupid little brace here on my pinky. I've climbed up here with far worse before."

"Touche." Hopper sighs. "If you start getting tired of anything let me know and I'll carry you up the rest of the way."

"Whatever you say, Hop." She laughed and climbed up the ladder without a problem. Climbing through the hatch, Joyce pulled herself up and surveyed the tree house. The couch was still laid out as a bed and the floor was in serious need of a sweep. Besides that everything seemed to be intact. Hopper reached for the .22 that was still laying on their small table and placed it back in the gun rack.

"Can't believe we haven't been here in almost a month." Joyce pouts, looking for the broom as she goes. She catches Hopper going for the bed. He doesn't slip his shoes off as he lays on his back, resting his hands behind his head.

"Hop, what are you doing?" Joyce huffs, finally finding the broom.

"Staying out of your way while you go on your unnecessary cleaning spree. It's a tree house, Joyce. We're not going to be coming back here for any length of time until at least April, so why worry about cleaning?"

"Because it will make it easier when we do come back." She said, already sweeping debris from the floor into a pile.

"Well, when you're ready to head back to the house, let me know." Hopper sighs, closing his eyes.

"You're really going to let me clean this whole place by myself?" Joyce whined.

"You're the one who wanted to come out here, remember?"

Two can play that game she thought. Placing the broom back in the corner, Joyce walked over to where he was laying and carefully climbed on top of him, straddling his thighs.

Hopper smiled when he felt the bed dip and looked up at her. "Finally realize I was right?"

"Shut up." Leaning forward with a grin, Joyce kissed him hard. Her fingers tangling through his hair as she opened her mouth and allowed him to stroke his tongue against hers. Biting back a moan, Joyce continued to distract him with her lips as she slid her uninjured hand between them, directly over the hardness she could feel beneath his jeans. His hips unconsciously flexed against her palm, a groan catching in his throat.

"Mmm, what are you doing?" Hopper asked, his hands sliding down her back to rest on her hips.

"Nothing, just sitting here, enjoying the view." She teased, kissing her way across his jaw and down his neck. Her fingers stroked over the seam of his crotch, then she grabbed his belt buckle, getting the claps free before his hand covered hers.

Moving to rest on his elbow, he let go of her hand to make her look at him. "Seriously...what are you doing?" He asked, searching her eyes for answers.

Biting her lip, she leaned forward to give him a quick kiss. "Messing around?"

"You know we can't..."

"Why not?" Joyce asked, quickly pulling his belt through the clasp, going for the button on his jeans next.

Hopper swallowed, suddenly nervous when he couldn't give her a reason why. "What exactly is it you want to do?" His hand wrapped around her wrist to keep her from going any further.

Using her free hand, Joyce grabbed the back of Hopper's head, nipping his lip before giving him a slow, deep kiss. "I just want to touch you..."

"Are you sure?" He asked, stroking his thumb against her skin as he continued to hold her.

Joyce pulled on his hair lightly, watching his eyes roll back. "Do you not want me to?"

"No!... I mean, fuck Joyce... I've wanted your hand on my dick since I was fifteen. I just... I just want to make sure that you're ready to do this. I don't want to do anything to hurt you or make you feel uncomfortable in any way."

"Hop, you don't know how long I've wanted to touch you. I just couldn't...because I didn't want to feel like I was leading you on, but now..." Joyce falls quiet.

"But now?" Hopper let go of her wrist and moved his hand to brush her cheek.

"Now it's more of an... if this is so wrong, then I don't want to be right type of situation."

Hopper is silent, still searching for the answer to the question he has been asking for years. "What exactly are you saying?" He sits up a little straighter, his crotch unintentionally rubbing against her.

A sigh she had been trying to hold back escapes with his accidental

touch. "I'm saying that I'm yours Hop. I want the hand-holding, the dates, the cheesy notes. I want it all, I want-"

Her words are drowned out by Hoppers' lips on hers. He's kissing her like she's oxygen and he's starved for a breath. His hands are on either side of her face, keeping her as close to him as possible. Joyce finds her fingers running through his hair, pulling slightly at the back of his neck.

"I just want you." Joyce whispers as she rests her forehead against his. The idea of finally being his causing her heart rate to increase slightly.

"Just so we're clear...you and I are officially dating? Like I'm your boyfriend dating?" He questions, leaning back onto the bed, allowing her to comfortably sit on his thighs once more.

"Yes Hop, I'm your girlfriend." Joyce smiles, feeling like someone just placed a crown on her head.

"Then I definitely don't see a problem with you continuing your plan of action." He jokes, gently thrusting toward her, keeping his hands on her hips to give her total control. In no time at all, her fingers found their way under his shirt, skimming over the trail of hair leading from his navel down to where it disappeared under the waist of his jeans. Enjoying the feel of his tight muscles against her skin. When she pushed his unclasped belt out of the way, he sucked in a deep breath, suddenly becoming hyper-aware of what was about to happen.

Her delicate fingers made quick work of the button on his jeans and before he knew it, she was slowly pulling down his zipper, exposing the thin material of his boxers, which didn't leave much to the imagination.

Joyce had no idea what to do at this point. Now that one barrier was gone, she started getting nervous. Choosing to avoid looking at his face, she tentatively reached out to grip him through his boxers, running her fingers, then her palm over him gently. She snapped her eyes up to meet his when he sucked in a sharp breath, finding his pupils already blown.

When Joyce paused for more than a few seconds, Hopper squeezed her thighs, trying to keep a clear head. "You don't have to do this Joyce. I won't be mad if you want to stop."

"I just don't know what to do." She admitted and Hopper smiled.

"Do whatever you want."

"When other girls...you know... what did they do that you liked?" She questioned, feeling a hint of anger toward any other female that had touched him before her and shame for being completely clueless when it came to this.

"I wouldn't know...no other girl has touched me the way you are right now Joy."

"Seriously? After all those dates, you never..." She asked, completely baffled.

"Nope. Why would I let someone else touch me when my girl was sitting at home?"

Joyce felt her chest tighten. Amazed he actually waited all this time considering the numerous opportunities thrown his way. Most guys would have jumped on the first available girl willing to show them their boobs, but apparently not Hopper. In a sense she should have known better. For one, he didn't lie to her. And two, he had been telling her for years, almost daily how much he loved her and wanted to be with her. "What if I hurt you?" She finally asked, her voice barely above a whisper. Finding the entire situation somewhat embarrassing. She just wanted this to be good for him.

A laugh escaped his lips and he instantly felt bad when he saw the look on her face. "I'm sorry...here." Lifting his hips slightly, he gripped the band of his boxers and slid them, along with his jeans down far enough to allow his impressive erection to spring free. "I promise whatever you do, you're not going to hurt me unless you're trying to."

Joyce's eyes went wide when she finally took in all of him laid out bare to her for the first time. She knew he was big, having felt him

pressed against her on more than one occasion, but actually seeing it in the flesh was an entirely different experience. Reaching out, she hesitantly wrapped her fingers around his length, but quickly pulled her hand away when he flinched.

"What? What did I do?" She asked, almost panicking.

Hopper chuckled, grabbing her wrist to bring her back. "Nothing, your hands are just fucking cold."

With a sigh, she allowed him to guide her to where her fingers were once again wrapped around him. Taking a few minutes to get used to the weight in her hand, she squeezed him carefully and lightly let her fingertips slide over the smooth skin of the underside of his cock. When she heard him gasp and felt a slight twitch against her hand, a flood of arousal coursed through her own body causing her to press her thighs harder against his.

"Will you show me how?"

Biting his lip to hold back a groan, Hopper placed his hand over hers and linked their fingers together, stroking up and down his cock, squeezing harder each time her hand reached the tip. He purposely made sure her palm slid over the slickness of his precum to spread it back down over his length. "It's OK." He panted when she gasped at the wetness touching her skin. "That's supposed to happen, just means it feels good." Letting her go, he gripped her thighs and watched her tiny hand stroke him exactly how he'd showed her, feeling himself starting to get extremely overwhelmed.

Joyce tried to squeeze her thighs together again to ease the ache between her legs but failed to find any relief until she shifted and ground down against Hopper's leg with a whimper.

"Oh Fuck." Hopper moaned, fisting a hand into the sheet under them when he realized she was practically dry humping him. Thrusting into her hand harder, he bit his lip when her grip was becoming too much. "Joyce...I'm close."

Turning her wrist slightly, Joyce changes the angle of her strokes and moans when his hips leave the bed, pushing his thigh directly against

her still aching clit. "Tell me what to do." She chokes out, never slowing her movements.

Hopper squeezed his eyes shut and ran a hand over his face, struggling to form a coherent thought. "I don't..." He starts, reaching out to grab the bottom of the sheet to pull over his middle just as he starts to cum. "Shit..." Is the last word he's able to make out as his release covers Joyce's hand and the sheet. Joyce is amazed by the amount of cum that is currently coating her palm and continues pumping him, enjoying watching him wither beneath her. When she finally stops, both of them are breathing heavily.

"Sorry, it's messy I know." Hopper apologized, taking Joyce's hand out from under the sheet to carefully wipe it off, followed by his dick.

"Is it usually that much"? Joyce questions, feeling a slight stickiness left between her fingers.

"Nah never, that was all because of you Joy." Hopper mumbles against her lips. Even though he just blew the biggest load of his life he can already feel himself getting hard again in his jeans. "We need to come clean the treehouse more often." He laughs, ignoring the playful slap Joyce puts on his chest.

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Knowing they have been gone for longer than this task should have taken, they carefully climb down the ladder and head back to the farm. Taking a pack of camels from his coat pocket, Hopper lights one of his last cigarettes and takes a long drag. When he offers it to Joyce, she takes it into her small hand and brings it to her lips.

"You promise that was okay back there?" She asked as she exhaled, smoke coming from her lungs and out into the chilly air.

"Words can't even describe how amazing it was Joy. Now I'll have to return the favor." Hopper puts his arm around Joyce's shoulder as they walk.

"Hopper you don't have to return any favors, it's just something I wanted to try."

"And what if I want to try stuff too?" He asks, taking his cigarette back from her. "I mean, you seemed to enjoy Halloween a hell of a lot." He laughs as Joyce playfully shoves his shoulder.

The sight of the farmhouse promised warmth and a hot meal. Mary had been deciding on what to make for dinner when they had left for the tree house. Kicking the light snow off of their boots, Hopper and Joyce walked into the house, both sighing at the heat that enveloped them. Walking into the kitchen however, they weren't met with the smell of dinner. Instead Mary and Greg were both huddled around the kitchen table. Countless photos from Joyce's black box and random documents littering the surface and surrounding chairs. Deep in conversation, the Hoppers didn't hear Joyce and Jim enter the house. Instantly feeling the change in Joyce's demeanor, Hopper shuffled in front of her, blocking the majority of the pictures from view.

"What's going on?" Jim calls out. His parents startle at the sudden sound of their son's voice.

"Jim we were just...we didn't hear you come in." Mary stutters, frantically trying to gather up the papers and photographs from the table. Hopper felt Joyce move around his body, allowing her to fully see what's going on in front of her. When Greg's eyes land on Joyce she can't help but to feel shame for the second time that day.

"It's okay Mrs. Hopper, it's not like I haven't seen it all before." Joyce says, moving further into the kitchen. She hesitantly sits down at the table, suddenly surrounded by images she knows she will never be able to forget. Hopper sits down beside her, his hand finding hers under the table, her braced pinky finger sitting outside his grip. Greg is the first to break the silence, knowing he's going to have to broach the subject of their help sooner rather than later.

"Travis is saying he never touched you, Joyce. That all these bruises came from somewhere else and for some reason, the judge is willing to hear his side of the story. It's in your best interest for us to make a timeline, documenting anything and everything he's ever done to you."

The Hopper's watch as Joyce picks a photograph up from the table.

Examining the black and purple bruise she had on her back earlier this year. Fighting the tears she knew were coming, she laid the photo back down on the table.

"This was because I didn't have a perfect time for the track part of the spring physical in April." Joyce slid the photo over, reaching for one where she had marks on her ribs.

"And this one was for making a B in calculus." Her voice hitched and Hopper instantly picked up on the change in her breathing.

"Joyce you don't have to do this." He protested, knowing it was hurting him about half as bad as it was her.

"He has to pay for what he did and if that means that I have to endure making a timeline, then that's what I'll do." She felt Hopper's hand slide to her knee. Mary moved first, taking a small pen and paper, she wrote down the cause of the beating and when. Carefully attaching it to the photo with a piece of masking tape, she did the same for the second photograph. For twenty minutes the family sat at the table, labeling and discussing the photographs. It wasn't until a loud knock came from the front door that they realized they hadn't even made a dent in the black box. Glancing down at his watch, Greg stands from the table.

"Who the hell could that be?" He wonders aloud.

"Lord I didn't realize it was so late, and I haven't even started cooking dinner yet!" Mary exclaims, quickly getting to her feet and heading for the fridge.

Joyce feels Hopper's hand on her shoulder and he starts rubbing small circles to try and calm her.

"You okay Joy?" He whispers, not wanting to draw attention to the obvious anxiety she's feeling. He watches as she nods and reaches for another photo.

"This one came from when I wouldn't tell him where I had been all weekend." She halfheartedly smiled, looking back up to Hopper. "It was that weekend when you and me went down to-"

"I already told you, if she doesn't want to see you then you're leaving, no if's and's or but's about it." Greg's voice echoes down the hallway. The sound of two separate bodies moving their way reaches the kitchen and Hopper can already feel Joyce shaking. Standing to his full height, he stands beside Joyce, ready to block her from whoever is approaching with his father.

"I'm not going to hurt her Greg, I just need to see her." A feminine voice exclaims from the hallway. Greg is the first to enter the kitchen, followed by a woman Joyce hadn't seen in eleven years. Standing in the doorway of the Hopper's kitchen was Linda, her biological mother.

"What are you doing here Linda?" Mary asks from her spot at the sink. She watches as Linda's eyes quickly scan the kitchen, before landing on Joyce and the remaining pictures on the table.

"Oh my Joyce, I'm so sorr-

"Don't." The single word pushes past Joyce's lips and Linda snaps her mouth shut.

Mary can feel the anger and hatred rolling off not only Joyce, but Greg and Jim as well. She sees Jim place his hands protectively on both of Joyce's shoulders and notices he's taking care not to touch her right one with too much pressure. Linda is focusing on the photos on the table too much for Mary's liking. Ignoring the silence in the room, she quickly grabs a tablecloth from the pantry and places it on the table, covering up any and all the evidence they had against Travis with one quick swoop.

"Why don't we go into the sitting room so everyone can talk?" Greg states, noticing the look of murder in his wife's eyes.

"That would be a splendid idea Greg, I'm sure we all have a lot of catching up to do." Linda's voice fills the kitchen, her eyes still resting on Joyce and Hopper.

"Right this way then." He instructs, motioning for her to follow him

out of the kitchen. The moment Linda is out of earshot, Mary is at Joyce's side.

"Honey, you don't have to say a word to her if you don't want to. You just tell me when and I'll kick her out of her faster than a buttered bullet okay?"

Joyce nods and stands from the table. Hopper has his hand in hers in seconds.

"I'm right behind you Joy, I promise, nothing is going to happen to you." He whispers into her ear.

Joyce takes his hand in hers and leads the way towards the sitting room.

Linda is already sitting down in one of the high backed chairs and Greg is leaning close to the rarely-used fireplace. When Joyce enters, she can feel both Greg and Linda's eyes landing on her and Hopper's hands. Quickly claiming the love seat as theirs, Joyce sits and stares at Linda, waiting for her to begin speaking.

"Hey baby doll, you've grown up so much since the last time I saw you." Linda exclaims, focusing all of her attention on Joyce.

"Yeah, that's what happens when you don't see someone for a decade, Linda." Joyce snipped, eyeing the women who had abandoned her years before.

"What do you want Linda?" Jim's voice deadpanned. It was taking every last bit of his willpower not to throw the women who had left Joyce alone with that monster out of his family home.

"Well, I see the politeness just flows from this house." Linda commented, straightening the leg of her light pink pantsuit. "Word got around through my church that Travis had been arrested and is to be tried for child abuse and attempted rape. When I knew it was safe to come back-"

"You go to church?" Joyce mouthed off, not giving a damn about the look Linda was giving her

"What do you mean attempted rape? Joyce what is she talking about?" Hopper's voice broke through the chatter of the room, unfortunately his question went unnoticed.

"Well yes, of course, I am a preacher's wife, it would be unforgivable of me not to attend." She voiced.

"Wait, wait, wait...So you're telling me that you left me ten years ago and just completely got a new life? You married a preacher? Next, you're going to tell me I have a brother." Joyce laughed, moving to the edge of her seat.

"You have three actually." Linda replied, looking down at her polished nails. The sitting room falling silent.

"You have gotta be shitting me!" Joyce suddenly yelled, making Hopper jump at her sudden outburst.

"Maybe I should make some coffee." Mary suggested, sidestepping out of the room. She needed an excuse to leave before she hit that horrible woman.

"Watch your language young lady!" Linda snapped, looking at Joyce as if she had been raised by a pack of wolves.

"I most certainly will not watch my language! You fucking left me! A seven-year-old, with a man who beat you every fucking night, who hurt me for doing the dishes wrong. You left without a word and all of a sudden you show up here, after ten fucking years and for what? To reconnect with the daughter you abandoned? To tell me that I have a stepdad whose a preacher and three brothers who probably don't even know my name? Does your husband even know I exist?" She screams, unable to hold back the rage anymore.

"Of course he doesn't cupcake..."

"Don't fucking call me that. I am not your precious fucking cupcake. I am the daughter you abandoned in a drug-induced haze who never heard from you again! Do you know what he did to me? What I've had to endure over the years? He broke my fucking nose, dislocated my god damn collar bone and beat me until I couldn't move on

countless occasions. Those pictures you saw in the kitchen do not do justice to the torture my body has been through because of you and him! If it wasn't for the Hopper's taking me in I would have died in that fucking trailer because you didn't have the guts to take me with you! Your own damn daughter! Now you come crawling back here asking for what? Forgiveness? I won't give you the satisfaction of being forgiven! I want it to sit and eat away at you like his touch did me!" Joyce screamed, her throat giving out with the force of her anger.

"But I'm your mother!" Linda cries standing to her feet.

"My mother is in the kitchen making your fucking coffee!" The room echoes with Joyce's words. She's holding back tears, refusing to let the women in front of her see her cry. Greg steps up from the fireplace then, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Linda I think it's time for you to go. She's said her peace. Now leave her be." His authoritative voice demands. Stepping between Joyce and Linda, Greg directs the woman toward the front of the house. Seconds later, they heard the front door open and the sound of a car starting fills the night. When Greg returns, informing them that Linda has left, all the rage Joyce was feeling quickly turned to exhaustion. The tears she had been trying so hard to hold back broke like a damn and trickle down her cheeks onto her red sweater. She feels Hopper's hand on her hip, trying to turn her to him, and as bad as she wants to just lay in his arms until she forgets this whole ordeal she cant. She needed to be alone to breathe.

"Hop, I can't right now, I need some time alone, to think." She whispers, hoping he understood. Hopper gives her a sad smile before laying a light kiss on her forehead.

"Don't wander off too far. It's cold outside." He coaxes, giving her hand two quick squeezes, before letting her go. Joyce was out the front door in seconds, already knowing her destination. The old porch swing to the right of the Hopper's front door had been a favorite spot of Joyce's for as long as she could remember. The wood chilled her skin through the denim of her jeans as she climbed into the swing, but the cold was the last thing on her mind.

The farm is silent with the exception of the slight squeaking of the old chains on the swing. Joyce quickly wipes her eyes when the sound of the front door opening intrudes on her thoughts. Mary is making her way over to her, a blanket over her arm and a cup of steaming hot chocolate in her hand.

"Figured you could use something warm for your throat." Mary commented, placing the cup down on a small side table. "Mind if I join you?" She questioned, gesturing to the spot to Joyce's right. Joyce shook her head, holding the swing still with her tiptoes while Mary climbed up and threw the flannel blanket over both of their laps.

"Joyce, honey you have every right to be mad at her. She left you and no mother should ever abandon her child. No matter how bad the circumstances are. You've been through more than any woman should have to go through, and it has made you so very strong. You've said your peace to her. She knows how you feel, and that anger that you're holding inside, you need to let it go honey. If you don't, it will eat you alive until there is nothing else, and darling you've fought too damn hard to let something like that tear you down." Mary finishes, opening her arms as Joyce leans into her. Mary holds her tightly against the November chill.

"You may not have come from my body Joyce, but you are my daughter. I'm here whenever you need me, no matter what time of the day or night. I'm here to protect you from whatever demons may come knocking on your door, understand?"

Joyce can't help the tears that are falling and stinging her cheeks in their wake.

"Now we're going to sit out here for a few more minutes and you cry all you need to, but once we leave this swing, we're not going to shed another tear for Linda again, agreed?"

"Yeah, I think I can do that." Joyce whispered, not wanting to strain her voice any more than she already had that evening.

"Good, because once we've gathered ourselves, I'm sending you and Jim to the diner. After all that I don't feel like cooking chicken pie

tonight."

"I honestly can't say I blame you. I'm sorry for my language in your house Mrs. Hopper."

"Don't think nothing of it honey, I wanted to tell the bitch off too. And you don't have to call me Mrs. Hopper. You can call me Mary or mom if you'd like darling."

Joyce, nodded, moving to fist her hand in the blanket on their lap.

"What do you say we go inside Mom? It's getting a little cold out here."

9. Chapter 9

Hopper stood in the sitting room with his father, not willing to admit it was killing him that it was his mother, and not him that was comforting Joyce on the front porch. His head was swimming with questions. What did Linda mean by an attempted rape? Did it happen when Travis beat the shit out of her a few weeks ago or before? Why didn't she tell him? Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration.

"Don't worry about it son, women are complex creatures. I've been with your mother for going on thirty years now, and there are still days when I can't read her."

"What did Linda mean about an attempted rape dad? What am I not being told?" Hopper demanded as he began to pace around the sitting room, his frustration not letting him stand in one place.

"Jim, just sit down son." Greg instructs, feeling the tension that's coming from his son.

"I don't want to sit down, I want to know what the hell is going on!" Hopper tried to keep his voice at a reasonable level and failed miserably. He had never been one to yell in anger, especially toward his father, but he was having a hard time controlling his emotions.

"Look Jim, when Joyce was at the station filing a report, she said that Travis had tried to rape her. Said that he lifted her shirt up and was unbuttoning her pants when she was able to kick him in the nose. She didn't want you to know." Greg stated, running his hands through his hair.

"Why the hell did she not want me to know!?"

"Because she knew you would react like this son!" Greg raised his voice back and they both stood in silence for a few seconds, both of them trying to douse the anger that was flooding through them.

"Joyce told us she didn't want you to know because she was worried about how you would react. She was afraid that you would treat her

different and in my honest opinion I agree with her. I know that the two of you have some kind of relationship, be it best friends, dating, or whatever, and she wasn't willing for it to change in the slightest. So she said not to say anything to you. I get it son, you love her. Sometimes she's going to need space or she's going to need to keep things away from you, to protect you. Just keep that in mind. She's not as fragile as you think she is." Greg gives his son a fatherly slap on the back just as Joyce and Mary come through the front door.

"Joyce and I have decided to pick dinner up tonight, I hope you boys don't mind." Mary calls from the hallway.

When Joyce rounds the corner, she almost runs smack into Hopper. "Whoa, didn't expect you to be so close." She hoarsely comments as her hand quickly intertwines with his.

"Jim, do you feel like running into town to pick up dinner? I just want to take a shower, have a nice drink and try to relax after all this." Greg questions from Mary's side.

"Not at all dad, just call Patty and put our order in. I'll get my usual." Hopper sighs, not really sure what to feel at that moment.

"Same for me Mr. Hopper." Joyce says and turns to place her head on Jim's chest, oblivious to the mood he's in. Hopper doesn't miss the grin his mother fails to hide as she turns to go into the kitchen. Once his parents are out of view, Hopper wraps Joyce tightly in his arms, needing to feel her after the events of the evening.

"Do you want to ride with me to pick up dinner?" Hopper mumbles into the top of Joyce's head.

"Absolutely, just give me a second to grab my coat. It's freezing outside."

Reluctantly, he lets Joyce go upstairs to get her coat and heads to the hall closet to grab his own. When he closes the door, Mary is standing right behind it, making him jump at her sudden appearance.

"Patty said they were pretty busy tonight, might be thirty minutes or so before the foods ready. Just thought you should know in case you

and Joyce wanted to ride around for a few minutes." Mary reaches up and places her hand on Hopper's cheek.

"You have to quit growing son, I can barely meet your eyes anymore." She giggles, knowing if he's anything like his father, he would still shoot up six or seven inches before he was finished growing.

"I'll try my best mom." He laughs. Hearing Joyce coming down the steps, Hopper steps away from his mother and pats his front right pocket of his jeans to check for his keys.

"You ready to go?" He asks Joyce, who is zipping up her coat.

"Whenever you are."

Hopper opens the front door, slightly losing his breath when the cold air hits him in the face.

"Holy hell, feels like its negative ten out here." He mumbled, quickly going to his truck to get the heat going.

"It's not so bad." Joyce states, jumping into his truck and sliding to the middle of the bench seat. Hopper quickly follows, putting the key into the ignition and turning the motor over. The truck roars to life as he straightens his coat and Joyce scoots as close as she possibly can to into his side.

"Besides, the cold gives me an excuse to be closer to you." Joyce sighed and carefully lifts up his coat and t-shirt. She can practically hear herself moan when her cold hands come in contact with the warm heat of his skin.

"Jesus Christ! How the hell are your fingers not falling off? You're freezing!" Hopper slightly recoils from her cold touch, but the urge to keep her warm outweighs his need for comfort.

"I'm always cold Hop, just makes it worse when the weather changes." Joyce halfheartedly smiles as she finally takes her hands off of Hopper's side and places them in her coat pockets.

The two rode in silence for a few short minutes, both of them just enjoying the peace from being out of the house. It's not until Hopper

notices Joyce wincing at the opposing headlights on the road that he breaks the silence.

"Everything okay Joy?" He questions, lifting his arm to allow her to place her head on his shoulder. She turns her face into his coat, doing her best to block out the bright headlights.

"Yeah, I've just had a headache since all that shit with Linda, and it just seems to be getting worse."

"Did you take one of your pills? The doctor at the hospital said headaches were more than likely going to happen with the trauma you went through."

"I've been out of them for about a week now." Joyce confesses.

"What? Jesus, Joyce why didn't you tell me? I could have gotten your prescription filled before you completely ran out." He scolds as he turns into the diners parking lot.

"Because medicine costs money, something I don't have a lot of. Figured I'd just tough it out and it would eventually go away."

"You had to have been taking at least two a day to be out of them now. You should have told us you were having so many headaches."

"Like I've said Hop, I don't want to be a burden."

"Well as of four pm today we are officially dating. That means that you aren't a burden and if I do something to help you, that's just me being a great boyfriend. And as that great boyfriend my first act will be to get that prescription filled tomorrow morning." He states matter of factly. Before Joyce can tell him not to, Hopper opens the driver door and slides out of the truck.

"I'm leaving the heat on for you, I'll be right back." He closes his truck door and quickly runs inside. Joyce watches him through the glass windows of the diner. He's standing at the register. talking with the owner Patty and Joyce smiles despite her headache when she sees him throw back his head in laughter at one of old man Kelly's corny jokes. Gathering their bags into one hand, Hopper throws a wave over his shoulder to the rest of the dinner occupants before coming

back outside.

Opening the passenger door, Hopper places the bags in the floorboard before hastily running behind his truck and into the cab.

"Sorry about that, everyone loves to joke with the chief's kid." He confesses, throwing the truck into reverse. Joyce squints her eyes when a car with their high beams on pulls in from the opposite direction. Her head was really beginning to pound, almost like she had a heartbeat in her skull. Hopper places his hand on her thigh, trying to comfort her in the best way he can at the moment.

"How about after dinner we go to my room and lay down huh? It's been one hell of a day and I honestly just want to lay down and hold you."

Joyce sighs, once again burning her head into his shoulder.

"Sounds like a plan to me." She mumbled, her words barely audible through the layer of wool from his coat.

"Are you sure you're okay Joyce? You've hardly touched your food." Greg states as he wipes his mouth with a napkin.

"I'm just not feeling too great Mr. Hopper." she admits as she feels Jim's gaze fall on her.

"Probably just the stress of the day coming down on you honey. Why don't you go ahead and go upstairs and get ready for bed?" Mary suggests as she rises to put plates in the kitchen sink.

"Yeah, I think that's what I'm going to do. Thank you for dinner." Joyce whispers, getting to her feet and slowly walking toward the steps. Hopper stands to follow, but the clearing of his father's throat fills the kitchen, gathering his attention. Once he's made sure Joyce is out of earshot, he sits back down at the table.

"Everything alright with Joyce, Jim?" Greg questions, taking a sip from his cup.

"She said her head was starting to hurt her about the time Linda showed up, then it just progressed from there." Jim admitted as he

fidgeted with a lone ketchup packet on the table.

"She'll be fine once she takes her medicine." Mary soothes, taking her seat beside Greg once more.

"She won't be able to take it until I get it refilled tomorrow morning. Apparently she has been out for a week or so now and just told me tonight. Said she doesn't want to be a burden and she didn't have enough money to get it filled."

"I don't understand what she doesn't understand about her not being a burden to us." Mary sighed, taking a small sip of her steaming coffee.

"I don't know either mom, it's just the way she is I guess."

"We have to go into town tomorrow morning anyway son, we can fill her prescription then. Hopefully, with a little sleep her headache will ease up a bit."

Hopper watched as his father reached for his mother's hand and brought it to his lips, placing a light kiss on her knuckles. Taking that as his cue to leave, he stood from the table and raced to the steps, not liking being away from Joyce even for such a short period of time. Opening his cracked bedroom door, he found her already laying in the bed, her bedside lamp off. She groaned when the light from the hallway flooded the darkroom.

"Sorry, I can't exactly see in the dark." He laughed.

Pulling his long sleeve shirt over his head, he instantly felt goosebumps cover his back and chest and decided to sleep in a shirt and sweatpants. Making his way to the closet, he quickly pulled his sweats over his hips and turned toward the bed to find Joyce with her head buried under her pillow.

"Just let me close the door and I'll be right there Joy." He didn't give his eyes time to adjust before carefully walking toward his bed, praying the entire way he didn't stub any of his toes. When his hands touch his bed he lets out a sigh of relief. Gently crawling underneath the blanket, he faces Joyce's back and pulled her to him, resting his

chest against her.

"I'm sorry you don't feel good." He whispers, not wanting his voice to make her head throb. Joyce didn't respond with words, but let a slight snore escaped her lips. Hopper smiled at the sound and placed a light kiss to her shoulder. He rested his hand on her hip and closed his eyes, beginning to chase his own dreams for the night.

Not again Hopper thought as he slowly opened his eyes, feeling Joyce twitching beside him under the covers.

Almost a month has passed since the incident with Travis, and Joyce's progress in healing both mentally and physically had been improving far quicker than any of the Hoppers had expected. She no longer flinched every time someone entered a room, she had better control over her anxiety and her shoulder was almost back to normal. Her nightmares had been few and far between. Everything had been moving in a positive direction until Linda decided to drop a bomb onto the Hopper household that evening.

Her last nightmare had been several days ago, but because of fucking Linda, Joyce was currently whimpering in her sleep and clutching the comforter to her chest.

Hopper moved to sit up, keeping his distance to not get hit if she decided to flail and reached out to rub his hand up and down her arm. "Joyce." He calls, shaking her gently. Making his voice a little louder when nothing changed. "Come on Joyce, wake up."

Suddenly Joyce started screaming which was something she had never done before, causing Hopper to jump out of his skin and pull his hand away thinking he had hurt her somehow. "Shhhh, it's ok." He watched as she jerked, her hand finding its way into her hair where she threads her fingers through the strands and continues to yell.

"Hop! Hopper!" Joyce screamed his name, her chest rising and falling rapidly as panic flashed across her face.

Hopper was about to reach for her again but jumped for a second time when his door swung open and the light flicked on, revealing

both of his parents standing in the doorway, his father had his pistol drawn and pointed toward the floor.

"What the hell is going on Jim?" Greg asked, looking around the room for an intruder of some sort.

"I don't know!" He says, getting out of the bed, thankful at that moment he had chosen to sleep in a shirt and sweatpants instead of just his boxers. "I can't get her to stop. Normally it passes within a few minutes."

Greg places his pistol on his son's dresser after putting the safety back on and steps forward to take in the situation.

Jim holds his hand out when his mother walks around to the side of the bed where Joyce is laying. "Mom be careful, she almost broke my nose the last time I couldn't get her to wake up."

Joyce screams out again, not making any sense as she begins to roll in her sleep. Mary had just reached her side when she rolls out of bed and hits the floor with a loud thump. The room is silent for a second before all three Hoppers are standing over her shaking body. Her knee is in the air and her screams have stopped. The only sign of the nightmare remaining is the sweat on her face and her labored breathing.

Once she catches her breath, Joyce quickly scoots away from the three pairs of staring eyes and curls into a ball against the wall near the bed. The pain in her head is unbearable, making her almost completely forget about the nightmare she'd been having.

"Joyce?" Hopper's voice calls out.

She ignores him, whimpering into her knees that are drawn against her chest when it feels like someone is stabbing the base of her skull with a fire poker. "I'm gonna be sick." She manages to choke out, a wave of nausea washing over her.

Mary is quick to help her stand, carefully guiding her to the bathroom, Jim right behind them. They barely make it in front of the toilet before Joyce is clutching the sides and puking into the bowl.

"Grab me a wet washcloth, Jim." Mary asked, dropping to her knees behind Joyce to hold back her hair.

Hopper opens the small closet in the bathroom and grabs a hand towel. He turns on the faucet and takes in a deep breath to stay calm. "Mom, what's happening?" He asked, hoping she doesn't pick up on how scared he is as he hands her the wet cloth.

"It's just a migraine son." Greg says from the doorway.

Mary carefully adjusts the cloth on the back of Joyce's neck when she moves away from the toilet to lean against the wall with her eyes closed.

"Are you sure?" It wasn't like Jim didn't trust his father, he just wanted to make sure Joyce was alright. "Do we need to take her back to the hospital?"

"She'll be fine once she gets her medicine. Right now she just needs a quiet, dark room." Greg announces, standing up from the door frame he has been leaning on.

"Do you think you can stand Joyce?" Mary asks as she rubs the poor girls back. Joyce shakes her head and instantly regrets the jarring movement.

"I've got her mom." Hopper offers. Once Mary is at Greg's side, Hopper is bending over to collect Joyce into his arm.

"Just put your hands around my neck." He gently instructs. Once he feels her cold hands on the back of his neck, he lifts her to his chest and stands straight. Motioning for his parents to go first, the group shuffles down the hallway back to Jim's room.

"Go pull the curtains closed Greg, the sun will be rising soon." Mary instructs, her motherly instincts going into overdrive. She fixes the comforter on the bed before Jim gently lays Joyce down and places the wet washcloth over her eyes.

Greg is reaching for his pistol, double-checking that the safety is in fact on.

"We've got at least two more hours before the pharmacy opens Jim. Why don't you and I get a jump start on chores while your mom makes breakfast? That'll give Joyce time to rest and then we can just relax this evening."

Knowing this is the best choice of action, Hopper nods and looks back down at Joyce's still form.

"Let me throw some clothes on and I'll meet you downstairs in ten dad."

Reluctantly, Hopper dresses for the day, choosing his most comfortable work clothes for the occasion. Before he leaves his room, he makes sure Joyce is tucked into bed safe and sound. Carefully placing a kiss on her cheek, he grabs his hat from the headboard and closes the door with a soft click.

Shower and sleep. Those were the only two things left on Hopper's agenda for the day. His parents had informed him they would be in town for a while, so he was going to take advantage of an early afternoon nap. That is, as soon as he washed the smell of horse shit from his skin.

Peeking in to check on Joyce, he found her still fast asleep. She had rolled over some time or another and was currently hugging his pillow to her chest. Even in dreams she still needs me he smiled to himself as he grabbed a fresh pair of sweatpants from his dresser.

The cold from the laminate flooring in the bathroom stung the bottom of Hoppers' feet as he waited for the warm water to slowly make its way through the pipes of the house that had been in his family for three generations. When steam finally began to cling to the mirror he peeled off his filthy work clothes and threw them into the hamper in the corner. Never in his life had he ever been more thankful for hot water and old spice.

He rubbed the body bar between his hand and washcloth, transferring the suds from the bar to the fabric. Normally he just ran the bar over his skin, but today, he felt like he needed an extra hand getting clean. Hopper hung his head. Allowing the hot water to hit the back of his neck. He watched as the dirt and grime of the day

swirled at his feet before finally going down the drain. The past few days had been a whirlwind of emotions both good and bad. Joyce had finally said yes to him, then of course Linda had to come and put a damper on the mood. Then finding out about the whole attempted rape situation. Add that to the stress of trying to make the case timeline and he was as tired as he had ever been.

Reaching for the generic shampoo his mother insisted on, Hopper squeezed a generous amount into the palm of his hand before working the liquid into the roots of his hair. He ignored the sting the suds caused in his eyes and he quickly rinsed his hair, not wanting the water to go completely cold on him. Shutting off the water, he stepped out, grabbed a nearby towel and wrapped it around his waist. He ran his hand over the fogged mirror, taking in his reflection for what felt like the first time in months. His tan had faded with the start of fall and the stubble on his cheeks was coming in nicely. He wouldn't admit it out loud, but he loved it when Joyce raked her nails over his chin. He toweled off and pulled on his sweatpants, sprayed on some deodorant and brushed his teeth, grimacing at the burn from the mouthwash. Opening the bathroom door he padded downstairs, the couch in the living room was calling his name. His head had barely hit the pillow which was tucked against the armrest before he was out cold.

Alone. This was the first time in months that Joyce had woken up alone. She had reached for Hopper's hand, only to find his side of the bed empty and cold. Her head pounded as she sat up and glanced around the room for any sign of Hopper. She rubbed her hands over her eyes when she saw the time on the clock. One pm? Had she really slept that long? Sitting up, she carefully placed her feet on the floor. The movement of her sitting made her stomach roll, throwing up earlier had made her feel better, but the aching in her skull was still there. Pulling the comforter off of the bed, she wrapped it around her shoulders and tiptoed to the door. Cracking it open, she was met with the bright light of the hallway. Quickly closing it back, she squinted as her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room once more. Sunglasses she thought, moving toward Hopper's dresser. Opening the top shelf, she rummaged around before her hands landed on the wire-framed glasses Hopper wore when he went on ride alongs with his dad. Sliding them over the slight bump in her nose, Joyce once

again walked toward the bedroom door, opening it for a second time.

The light was at least bearable with his glasses on. Making sure the blanket was secure around her small body, Joyce found her way downstairs, looking for a sign that anyone was home or awake. At the bottom of the stairs, a sound she would know anywhere met her ears. Walking into the living room, Joyce was met with the loud sound of Hopper's snoring. He was fast asleep on the couch, his right arm thrown over his eyes and a foot dangling toward the floor. Without thinking, Joyce walked toward the couch and carefully climbed on top of him, chest to chest, finally finding a comfortable position resting her stomach between his thighs. She felt his body move underneath her as he slightly came too.

"Joyce? What are you doing?" He whispered, looking down his chest to the small woman who was currently sandwiching him between herself and the couch.

"Woke up. You weren't there." She mumbled, folding her arms onto his chest.

"Mom and Dad said you needed your rest, I didn't want to bother you." He mumbled, reaching to help her pull the comforter over both of their bodies.

"You're never a bother Hop. I missed you." She snuggled into his body, not caring that Mary and Greg could walk in any moment. Goosebumps erupted over her skin as Hopper placed his warm hand on her lower back, pushing her closer to him.

"Why are you wearing my sunglasses?" He questioned sleepily, raising an eyebrow at her.

"It's bright in the hallway and my head still hurts."

"Ahh makes sense."

The room is quiet with the exception of their breathing and it doesn't take long before the two are both back asleep.

"All I'm saying is we need to start working on that float for the police department honey. The parade is in a few weeks and we haven't even

come up with a plan yet." Mary states, closing the truck door as she and Greg walked up to the porch. Opening the front door, Greg was surprised to find no sign of his son anywhere.

"Maybe he's taking a nap on the couch." Mary whispered, hanging her coat up in the hall closet. Walking into the living room, she stopped in the doorway, the sight in front of her making her smile. She shushed Greg when he came around the corner, not really paying attention to who was in the room. Joyce and Jim were both fast asleep on the couch and Jim had one arm at the small of Joyce's back. The other, she suspected was resting on Joyce's ass cheek. Both of them snored lightly dead to the world.

"Took long enough." Greg whispered, from behind Mary as he pulled his wife to him.

"No kidding, I thought they were going to be in college before it finally happened." She giggled, leaning back into Greg's embrace.

"It's going on three, should we wake them?" He questions, finding a belt loop on Mary's jeans and hooking his thumb through it.

"She needs to take her meds, besides that let them sleep. Hell, I wouldn't mind a nap myself. What do you say Chief?"

"Sounds like a plan to me darlin'."

Greg went to the kitchen to get Joyce a glass of water while Mary quietly called the girl's name.

Not wanting to get punched in the face, she refrained from shaking Joyce awake. Finally, she stirred, lifting her head from Jim's chest.

"Hey, its okay honey, just need you to take your meds then you can go right back to sleep." Mary informed, handing Joyce the small white pill. She popped it into her mouth and gratefully took a long drink of water.

"Go on back to sleep, I'll wake y'all up for dinner when it's ready."

Mary knew Joyce hadn't even heard her last words before she was back asleep, nuzzling her head into Jim's chest. Smiling at two of the

most important people in her world, Mary stood and went upstairs, wanting to nap with the third.

10. Chapter 10

The smell of pork chops woke Joyce from her medicated coma. Reaching out with her other senses, she heard Hopper's heartbeat beneath her and felt his hand on her ass cheek. The realization of this brought a smile to her lips and hesitantly, she opened her eyes. The living room was dark, only a single beam of light from the hallway touching the rug.

Hopper stirred under Joyce's weight. He felt her ass in his palm and quickly moved his hand up to her lower back. As usual when he first wakes up, he was already hard and in seconds, Joyce would be feeling him pressing against her stomach.

"Happy to see me Hop?" She whispered. Reaching between their bodies, Joyce ran her hand over his length, knowing good and damn well he didn't have boxers on under his sweatpants.

"Joyce..." He warned. Not trusting himself or her after finding out what had really happened with Travis. It wasn't so much he didn't really trust her, he just wanted to make sure she wasn't suffering from some sort of PTSD.

"Yes Hopper?"

Footsteps could be heard coming from the hallway and both teenagers acted as if they were still asleep. Light flooded the living room as Mary flipped the switch on the wall.

"Kids, time to wake up, dinners ready!" She calls cheerfully. Hopper sat up first, nearly dropping Joyce into the floor in his haste.

"Shit sorry Joyce."

"Jim watch your language in the house." Mary scolded before turning on her heel and walking out of the living room.

Joyce righted herself and glared at Hopper.

"What was that?" She grumbled, putting her hands on her hips.

"Nothing, just starving is all." Hopper lied. He didn't want to bring up the rape attempt right before dinner. Joyce didn't eat enough as it is. "Come on, let's go wash up."

"Did I do something wrong?" Joyce questioned, trying to calm the uneasiness that's starting to overwhelm her body.

"No Joy, we're fine. I'm just a little cranky and hungry is all. You've done nothing, I promise we're good." Hopper takes his hand and threads his fingers through hers.

"Now come on, I feel like I could eat a whole cow by myself."

-

The kitchen is slightly smokey when Joyce and Hopper enter. Mary is placing the last few bowls on the kitchen table, while Greg places silverware at everyone's seat.

"Is there anything I can help with Mary?" Joyce questions standing off from Hopper who is still washing his hands at the kitchen sink.

"No dear, everything is ready, you just sit right on down." Mary says as she sits in front of the mashed potatoes. Joyce complies and takes a seat to her left. Once the men have found their seats, Mary begins to pass around the night's sides which consist of mashed potatoes, corn, and green beans. The table is weirdly quiet. Neither Joyce or Hopper saying anything.

"So... when did this happen?" Mary broke the silence, pointing with her butter knife between Hopper and Joyce. Hopper didn't miss the smile that broke out on Joyce's face. Looking down at his watch, he did some quick calculations before looking back at his mother.

"About twenty six hours ago." He moved his hand to meet Joyce's across the table. Noticing the blush that was covering her cheeks.

"Well it's about damn time! I thought the two of you would be out of college before you finally made it official." Greg laughed, bringing his glass of sweet tea in the air in a quick toast.

"To Joyce and Jim. The kids who should have been dating for six years finally admit their feelings."

"Dad!" Hopper groans, hiding his face in the hand that wasn't currently wrapped in Joyce's.

"Ahh come on Jim, we all knew you liked her, I remember that one time you fell asleep on the couch and-"

"Mom no! Can we please not do this? Yes, Joyce and I are dating, it's not that big of a deal." Hopper yells, stabbing his mac and cheese with his fork.

"Not a big deal? What do you mean, you two have been in love with each other for years and it's all finally all coming together!" Mary claps her hands together in front of her. "Why the next thing you know, you two will be getting married and I'll have four grand babies and-"

"Four?"

"Grand babies?" Joyce and Hopper both began to shovel food into their mouths, not caring that they were making a mess or missing their mouths completely in a hurry to be away from his parents. Both teens cleared their plate in record time and stood to place them in the sink.

"I'm still pretty tired guys, I think I'm going to go take a shower and go to bed if that's okay?" Joyce announced, not waiting for an answer before bounding up the stairs.

"Yeah...I um... I need to clean out my book bag or something." Hopper called over his shoulder, practically running up the steps after Joyce. Greg and Mary were able to contain their laughter long enough for the kids to get up the stairs before they broke out laughing, both of them gasping for air.

"Well at least we get a quiet evening alone to watch Gunsmoke."

The sound of running water filled the upstairs hallway. Hopper knew Joyce felt just as awkward as he did, if not more. They had both expected some joking from his parents, but nothing like that. After fiddling around in his room for a few minutes, he decided to go brush his teeth. Knocking gently on the bathroom door he let himself in.

Steam had already fogged the mirror. How Joyce could stand the water being that hot was a mystery to him.

"I'm going to brush my teeth real quick Joy, then I'll be out of here." He said toward the curtain and walked over to the sink.

"You're fine Hop I'll be here for a few more minutes at least."

Hopper reached for his toothbrush only to find it missing. Looking around the small sink, it was nowhere to be found.

"Hey Joy, have you seen my toothbrush?" He questioned, double checking the counter behind him.

"You mean this one?" She replied, peeking out from behind the shower curtain, his red toothbrush in her hand.

"What in the hell are you doing with it?" He reached for her hand, only for her to pull it back into the shower.

"If you want it you're going to have to come get it Hop." She teased before closing the curtain and disappearing back into the shower. Sighing, Hopper slid his shirt up and over his head. Walking over to the curtain he cleared his throat.

"I just want to brush my teeth."

"And you can, as soon as you have your toothbrush." She giggled.

Knowing he was going to regret this, Hopper reached his hand just behind the curtain and motioned for her to hand it over.

"Come on Joyce, give it." He complained.

"Just reach a little further Hop and you can have it." She called. Reaching further, his hand came in contact with her warm skin. "Holy shit your hands are cold! Why don't you come warm them up?"

He feels the stream of the shower flow onto him more, soaking him up to his forearm. Pulling his hand back in frustration when she still refused to comply, Hopper went to the sink, grabbed the mouth wash and did a quick rinse before going to his bedroom. Sliding off his

sweatpants, he let them fall to the floor and pulled on a pair of boxers, then climbed into bed. He heard the water in the shower turn off and allowed himself a few moments of calm before the storm he knew was brewing.

"Goodnight Mary, Goodnight Greg." Joyce called, then stepped into Hopper's room and quietly closed the door. Hopper watched as she walked to the far side of the room in nothing but a blue and white striped towel. She stopped at the dresser and opened the top drawer, pulling out a pair of panties. Looking over her shoulder, her eyes met with his and he huffed, rolling on his other side to allow her some privacy. He heard the sound of her footsteps going to turn off the light before she joined him under the covers. Her cold hand wrapped around his torso as she snuggled into his back.

"Are you going to tell me what I did to make you so angry?" She whispered into his shoulders. He's quiet for a second, allowing the annoyance that had been grating on him to ease slightly. Rolling over, Hopper faced her and adjusted the blanket as he settled back into the mattress.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He questions, pulling away from her hand as it attempted to touch his face, not missing the hurt in her eyes. Hopper rolled to lay on his back, not sure if he could do this.

"Why didn't I tell you what Hop? I'm so lost right now."

"Why didn't you tell me that Travis tried to rape you that night?" He spits out the words venomously. Just the thought of that happening was making his blood boil. "I thought you trusted me with everything Joyce. For fucks sake, you told me when he was beating you, but now all of a sudden you can't tell me this? I thought you trusted me more than that." His voice rose a few octaves below yelling.

When his question is met with silence, Hopper finally breaks and looks over at her and his anger immediately fades when he sees tears rimming her eyes.

"Joyce I'm not mad at you, I'm just upset that you didn't trust me enough to tell me." He huffed, reaching out to wipe a tear away with his thumb. He quickly pulls back when he sees her flinch.

"I'm not going to hit you..." He says moving his hand to her hip.

"I know Hop...it's just a reflex. I'm sorry." She whispers before moving against his chest and placing her head on his sternum.

"I didn't tell you because I was afraid." She admits, not caring that her tears were falling now.

"Joy why would you be afraid to tell me anything?"

"I was afraid that you wouldn't want me anymore if you knew that another guy had tried to touch me. I thought you would think that I was damaged goods or something. I would be devastated if you didn't want me because of something he did." She lets out in a rush.

Hopper instantly feels guilty for letting his anger get the better of him and pulls her close, rubbing circles into the small of her back.

"Nothing in this world is ever going to make me stop loving you. You're mine Joy, and that's never going to change." He kisses the top of her head, hoping she knows his telling the truth.

"I'm afraid that you're going to come to your senses one day and see me the way everyone else does."

"I see you just fine honey. You're kind, sweet, beautiful, and the strongest woman I know. Why on earth would I want to change how I see you, when all I see are remarkable things?"

He feels her smile against him and her fingers start running through the hair on his chest. The sensation is making his skin erupt in goosebumps.

"Joy come on, you know what that does to me." He quietly moans.

"That's why I'm doing it." She giggles, placing a kiss on his collar bone. She sits up and pushes both of his shoulders into the mattress. Before he grasps what's going on, she's on top of him straddling his thighs.

"What are you doing? My parents are right down the hall..."

"What I've been trying to do all evening but you've been ignoring me." Leaning forward, Joyce gently pulls on his hair and forces his head back to expose his neck, a favorite spot of hers. She kisses his pulse point, making him moan.

Hopper moves his hands to her hips and digs his fingers into the soft fabric of her night shirt, already feeling his cock hardening. With nothing but two thin layers of cotton between him and her, it's no wonder all the blood in his body is running south. Joyce shifts on top of him and grinds against his erection, trying to satisfy her own selfish needs. When he moves his hand from her hip and reaches for the hem of her shirt, her hands come down on top of his, stopping him. Her body has stopped moving and she's become tense.

"Why have you been avoiding me all evening?" Joyce questions as she narrowed her eyes down at him. She didn't miss when he let out an aggravated sigh.

"I didn't know if you really wanted to do stuff with me or if it was just some side effect of the attempted rape. Shit Joy, I've never dealt with anything like this before and I don't want to do anything that's going to jeopardize us."

"So instead of just talking with me, you ignore me all night and make me feel like shit?"

"I wasn't trying to ignore you Joyce. I just hadn't had a chance to talk with you about the situation. Linda brought it up along with a migraine, so I haven't had an opportunity to talk to you."

"I guess you're right." Joyce mumbles and looks at the clock, Hopper notices her eyes widen. "Fuck it's already after one, we're going to feel like crap tomorrow." She states. Climbing off of him to curl up on her side, leaving Hopper in a state of confusion.

"Umm Joy? You going to finish what you stated here?" Pointing downtown at his erection, he watches as Joyce rolls over, places a kiss on his cheek and turns the bedside lamp off.

"You'll be okay in a few minutes. Just think of goats, or old ladies or something." With that, Joyce places her arm under her pillow and

attempts to fall asleep.

Hopper's alarm clock began to chime at six forty five sharp. He slapped at his bedside table, hoping he hit the snooze button. Failing, he sat up and turned it off completely and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, his gaze falling on Joyce's sleeping form. How the hell she slept through that loud ass alarm he would never know. Reaching over, he gave her a gentle shake.

"Joyce come on, today's the day you rejoin society." He called, trying his best to not scare her.

"Ugh, I don't wanna." Her muffled voice called back.

"Well you don't have a choice. Come on, you don't want to be late on your first day back." Hopper stood and stretched, before he made his way to his closet. Rifling through his various shirts, he finally narrowed his choice down to two.

"What color flannel should I wear today Joyce? Red, or Orange?"

Hopper turned to find Joyce finally sitting up in bed, her hair looked like a bird had slept in it and he couldn't help but laugh, not caring that she was giving him the stink eye.

"The orange one looks better on you , but that's just what I think." She replied, raising her arms above her head to stretch. Hopper did his best to ignore how her shirt rode up and revealed the soft skin of her stomach. Turning back to his closet, he hung up the red flannel and pulled the orange one over his shoulders.

"I'll meet you downstairs." He calls over his shoulder to her as she climbs out of bed.

"Okay, I'll be down in a few minutes." Joyce stands, her night shirt barely covering her ass. Hopper shook his head and walked out the door. The last thing he needed was to get a hard on before going to the kitchen with his mom. Walking down the steps, he found Mary in her usual spot at the table. The December edition of the Hawkins Monthly in her hands.

"Morning mom." Hopper said as he sat down across from her, piling a

plate full of bacon and pancakes. She really did spoil them.

"Morning honey, did you sleep okay last night?" Mary questioned, not looking up from her magazine.

"Yeah, I was pretty tired even though I slept most of the afternoon." He comments, pouring syrup on his plate. Joyce's footsteps can be heard from the staircase before she finally came into the kitchen.

"Good Morning Mary." Joyce greets, pulling up a seat next to Hopper as she reached for the orange juice.

"Good Morning, sleep well?"

"Yes ma'am. It feels like all I've done the past few days is sleep." Taking a bite of her pancakes, Joyce looked over to Hopper.

"Yeah, having a migraine will do that to you. So will being under stress. You really get sleep deprived when you have a kid. You'd do anything in the world to get them to go to sleep, then you worry when they're sleeping that they'll stop breathing, so you don't sleep at all." Mary explains..

"You don't have to worry about that happening mom, just because we're dating doesn't mean we're going to do anything else. I don't even know if I want to have kids, matter less if Joyce wants them or not." Hopper replies, finishing his breakfast. Looking down at his watch, he stood and placed his plate in the sink.

"You about finished Joyce? We need to get going so were not late."

"Yeah, I'm done." Putting the last piece of bacon in her mouth, Joyce stands and puts her dishes in the sink as well. Walking into the hallway, Joyce grabbed her book bag for the first time in over a month.

"Bye mom, see you this afternoon." Hopper called as he slid his coat on. Walking to his truck, he opened the passenger door for Joyce, allowing her to climb up into the cab where she reached over and unlocked his door. Putting his book bag in the floorboard beside Joyce's feet, Hopper cranked the truck.

"I'll have the heat going in a second."

Joyce scoots into the middle of the bench and gets as close to him as she can.

"It's not so bad when I'm close to you."

"Well you can be as close as you want. You ready for today?"

"I guess I kind of have to be. It's not like I can avoid going to school when I have to graduate." She mumbles.

Hopper finally turns the heat on once the truck has warmed up. "So are we going to continue to act like we don't like each other, or are we allowed to hold hands in the hallway?" He questions, flicking on his turn signal.

"I don't know Hop, I don't want any drama my first day back. Everyone already thinks I was committed for beating up Chrissy."

"Well if they think you're crazy, hopefully they won't mess with you. Besides, It's December. We graduate in May, just a few more months and you don't have to worry about seeing any of these assholes again."

Pulling into the student parking lot at school, Hopper felt Joyce tense.

"It's okay Joy, I'm right here. We only have one week before we're out for Christmas break. We got this." He says, placing a hand on her knee. "If you need to go home at any time today just let me know okay?"

"Okay...It's going to be weird to be back at school. I hope you're right about people leaving me alone."

Hopper opened his door and slid out of the truck with ease. Holding out his hand, he helped Joyce do the same and when she didn't release her hand from his, he felt his heart soar. Slinging her bag over his shoulder, Hopper locked his truck door, and hand in hand they walked across the parking lot and into the school.

Joyce felt like everyone's eyes were on the two of them. Maybe it was just her imagination running away with her, but she could swear the whispers were already starting. She shouldn't care, and she knew this. Hopper was a grown man and could make his own decisions and apparently she was one of them that he refused to change. Making it to her locker, she was surprised not to find slurs covering the green surface.

"Wow, no one destroyed my locker while I was away. Are you sure we're at the right school?" She laughed, putting her combination into her lock and pulling the door open. When the cheap metal opened, countless pieces of folder paper fell to the floor. Reaching down, Joyce noticed Hopper's familiar hand writing on the majority of them.

"What's all this Hop?"

Hopper's hand came into her vision, helping her pick up the small pieces of paper.

"I may or may not have gotten bored on several occasions and decided to write you a note...or twenty..."

Joyce felt heat flood her cheeks and she looked away before he could see her blush. She put all of the notes into her book bag, intending to read them at lunch. Hopper intertwined his fingers with hers once more and although he wouldn't admit it, he was worried about her being back at school. He didn't want her coming from the safety of the farm and his family, just to be tossed back to the wolves of Hawkins High.

"Got everything you need for your first few classes?" He questions as she closed her locker.

"Yeah I believe so, I can't wait to hand all this work in to get it out of my bag."

Hopper walked Joyce to her first class of the day and as he stopped outside the classroom door, he pulled her close and placed a kiss on her forehead.

"Have a good day honey, I'll see you at lunch okay? Maybe we can go share a smoke before biology?" He chuckled, feeling her wrap her arms around his waist. She laid her head on his sternum, looking up into his eyes.

"I'm going to miss you." She whispered, hoping no one was around to hear her little confession.

"I'm going to miss you too Joy." He smiled, leaning down to place his lips on hers. The five minute bell rang suddenly, making Hopper groan.

"Go on to class, I'll see you soon." Joyce laughed, giving Hopper one last kiss. She turned and walked into the classroom, not even caring that the rest of her peers were watching her.

The cafeteria was humming with the voices of hungry teenagers, all of whom were all excited with the upcoming Christmas break. Joyce sat at her usual table, happy that none of her classmates had decided to claim it as theirs during her absence. Pulling out a paper bag from her book bag, Joyce opened her peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a Ziploc full of chips. She felt him before she saw him. That familiar feeling of safety enveloped her. Looking up, she saw Hopper walking toward her, his own paper bag in his hand. Pulling up a chair beside her, he placed his hand on her thigh.

"Hey good looking, whatcha got cookin?" He joked as Joyce held up her sandwich.

"Here we have the finest blend of a fresh peanut spread, alongside of preserved grapes." She giggled, taking a bite of it.

"How's your day been? No one has messed with you have they?" He questions, unpacking his own lunch.

"Surprisingly no, it's like I don't exist and it's amazing. If it had been like this the past six years I probably wouldn't have lost my shit and beat up Chrissy." She laughed, loving this new found feeling of freedom that came with being with Hopper.

The two of them talked and joked as they finished their lunches.

Neither one of them giving a damn that several eyes were on them at all times. The news that the most popular guy in school was dating the least popular girl was spreading like wildfire.

"You about ready to go for a smoke?" Hopper asked, crumpling up his and Joyce's paper bag to throw away.

"Absolutely. I always crave one after I eat I and I have no idea why." Helping Joyce stand from their table, Hopper laced his fingers with hers and stepped out into the courtyard. The pair easily ducking out the small hole in the fence as they made their way to the bleachers.

"Did your mom seem to be acting weird to you this morning?" Joyce suddenly asked as she took a drag off of her cigarette.

Hopper exhaled smoke from his lungs, giving her a look. "Yeah a little. I think her and dad just don't know how to act around us now that we are officially dating. I'm honestly surprised they haven't told you to sleep on the couch since we told them."

"Yeah, I figured they were going to tell me that too. That or make me go back to the tree house. Hopefully if that happens though, Greg will trust me with the kerosene heater." Joyce rubbed her hands down her arms for emphasis on the cold. Even though they both had on their winter coats, it was still only fifteen degrees outside.

"Joy? Can I ask you something?" Hopper questioned as he took yet another drag off of his cigarette.

"What's up?"

"My mom brought up grand babies last night...and this morning she was talking about how having kids makes you lose sleep. Out of all the years I've known you, you've never mentioned if you wanted to have kids or not...I'm just curious how you feel about it?" He stated in a rush, ignoring the blush he could feel creeping up his neck.

"I mean, I've always wanted to have a family Hop. I just never thought it was in the cards for me ya know? I always thought I would never get away from Travis, and I wouldn't want any child to be around him. But yeah, I think I would like to have at least one kid.

Maybe four." She teased, trying not to laugh when Hopper's eyes widened at the number she had stated. Taking one last hit from her cigarette, Joyce dropped the butt and crushed it out with the heel of her boot.

"We don't need to be late to Biology."

Walking hand in hand into their last class of the day made Joyce's anxiety spike. She knew Chrissy would have something smart to say about her and Hopper dating and she honestly didn't know if she had the energy to deal with her shit right now.

"Welcome back Miss Horowitz!" Her professor greeted as they walked in the door.

"Thanks Professors, it feels good to be back. Here's the work from the past month." Joyce handed her papers to her teacher and made a move toward her seat only to have Hopper's hand tighten in hers as he stayed put.

"Hey professor, I was wondering if I could move my seat? It seems that my current lab partner and I have come to a disagreement and I would prefer to keep things between us as professional as possible." Hopper asked loud enough for the students who were already seated to hear, including Chrissy.

"Absolutely Mr. Hopper, I was going to suggest this anyway, it seems I need to keep a closer eye on Miss. Carpenter. Joyce, if you don't mind, would you be okay with switching seats?" The teacher asked, moving to take her seat behind the desk.

"Wait just a second here, that's not fair!" Chrissy's high pitched voice called out from her seat at the back of the class.

"Why is that Miss Carpenter?" Their professor questioned, shuffling papers into a neat pile in front of her.

"I've been at this same seat all year, I shouldn't have to move just because Jim decided to get a new girlfriend." Chrissy whined, folding her arms across her chest.

"I'm not asking you to change seats because you and Mr. Hopper are

no longer an item Miss Carpenter. I am telling you to move seats because it's close to the end of December and you still have a D in my class while both Mr. Hopper and Miss Horowitz both have had an A. If you want to graduate, I suggest you gather your belongings and move to the front of the class."

Everyone in the room was silent with the exception of Hoppers deep laugh. Students watched as Chrissy gathered her notebook and book bag and moved to Joyce's old seat, first row, dead center on the professor's desk. Moving to her new seat, Joyce bypassed her classmates, feeling as if she had won another fight. Hopper sat down in his original chair and began pulling stuff out of his book bag. Glancing up, he was met with several pairs of eyes.

"There a problem?" He asked loudly, Making everyone turn around in their seats. Joyce moved her hand to rest on Hoppers thigh once she was seated and gave him a gentle squeeze before settling down and focusing on their teacher's lecture.

11. Chapter 11

Being able to sit with Joyce in class was something Hopper hadn't had the privilege of doing since middle school, and to say he was excited, was putting it lightly. The first three days were like Christmas morning. They were able to talk to each other, hold hands under the table, slide each other silly little notes, and of course get yelled at by the teacher to be quiet. But Joyce was happy, so he didn't care if they got in trouble. Being away from Chrissy and placed at the back of the class away from everyone else who wanted to bother Joyce, was more than he could have asked for.

That was until Thursday. Everything had been going great, then her hand lingered on his knee too long and she gave him the sweetest damn smile he'd ever seen. She'd been going over the worksheet in front of them and made a joke, a joke that he completely missed when he was drawn to the light in her eyes and her lip when it found its way between her teeth. Shit.

"Are you even listening to me?" Joyce whispered, squeezing his leg.

Clearing his throat, Hopper reached down to place his hand over hers.

"Kind of?" He replied with a chuckle and blushed.

"Wait...are you blushing?" Joyce teased, raising her brow.

Setting his face back to normal, he bit the inside of his cheek and shifted to ease the discomfort in his now tight jeans. What the hell was wrong with him? Popping a random boner in class was something he could see doing while he was going through puberty, but now? When he was basically an adult and all Joyce had done was give him a look and barely touched him? He was just going to blame all the teasing he'd suffered the past few days with her randomly grabbing him with no release afterwards.

With a sigh, he dropped his pen and rubbed a hand over his face, trying anything and everything he could think of to will his hard on to go away.

"Hop?" Lost in thought, Joyce's voice startled him and he sat up a little straighter.

Still choosing to avoid eye contact, he stared down at the paper in front of them. "Hmm?" Was all offered.

"What's wrong?" She asked, worried.

When she squeezed his leg again, he finally risked a glance in her direction and swallowed.

Knowing he had to give her some kind of an explanation, he looked around to make sure the rest of the students were busy with their assignments and that the teacher still had her nose buried in a book. He reached down again to cover her hand and removed it from his leg to place over the bulge in his jeans.

Joyce's eyes went wide when she felt how hard he was and looked up at him shocked. She didn't have the slightest idea how the body of an eighteen year old male worked when it came to this, but she also didn't think things like this happened that often.

"Why?" She whispered curiously, turning her body just enough to block the view of anyone who might choose then to turn around in their direction.

Hopper blushed again almost instantly and jumped when she pressed her hand harder against him. Trying to hide his gasp behind a cough, he dropped his head to the table on top of his arm and took in a deep breath.

"This...this right here is why." He groaned and started shaking when she continued to move her hand. "Stop..." He begged, already to the point where the slightest touch was becoming too much. If she kept teasing him, there was no way he'd be able to stand, let alone walk out of class with any dignity still intact. He sure as hell wasn't about to allow her to make him cum in his pants. Especially not in the middle of class. He was a senior in high school for christ's sake.

Grinning, Joyce finally stopped torturing him and went back to filling out their paper. Class would be over in fifteen minutes and they had

only completed three of the questions. Thankfully she already knew most of the material and took it upon herself to finish while Hopper dealt with his not so little problem.

When the bell rang, Joyce stood to gather her things and gave Hopper a look to make sure he was ready. He got to his feet after a second and she smiled, taking his hand to lace their fingers together as she dropped their assignment onto the teacher's desk and pulled him to her locker.

"So... you going to tell me what caused that little incident back there?" Joyce laughed as she stuffed all of their belongings into her locker. Hopper swallowed and looked up and down the hallway in case someone was listening.

"You do this thing... where you bite your lip and it's so incredibly sexy. I honestly have no idea why, but it's such a turn on. Not to mention I haven't got off in over a week and you've been teasing the shit out of me." He admits, watching as she not so subtly bent over to tie her shoe and allowed her ass to skim the front of his jeans. Thoughts of grabbing her hips and pulling her to him suddenly filled his head.

"Joy come on, you're killing me." Hopper whispered, taking a step back from her as she turned to face him. She was intentionally biting her bottom lip and he groaned, reaching for her hand.

"You're the goddamn devil you know that?"

Joyce was barely able to keep up with Hopper's long stride as they walked toward the student parking lot. At one point, she thought he was going to pick her up and throw her over his shoulder in his impatience at her tiny footsteps. He reached the truck first, walking to the passenger side.

"Whoa, hold up," Hopper called as Joyce reached for the handle on the passenger door, not quite getting it open before he grabbed her wrist. Quickly turning her to face him, Hopper cupped her cheeks and kissed her hard. A moan escaped her parted lips and Hopper took the opportunity to slide his tongue into her mouth, messaging his against hers in long, slow strokes until her knees started to buckle.

Moving a hand to grip her side, Hopper made sure to press his hips against her, wanting her to feel exactly what her touch did to him. Wanting her to know exactly how worked up he had gotten over the last few days.

"Hop," Joyce whined, pulling away from his lips breathless as she looked up at him with hooded eyes.

Hopper grinned, nipping her lip. "Yes?" Taking a quick look around to make sure no one was watching them, Hopper slowly slid his hand from her side, gliding his fingertips over her stomach and down between her legs where he pressed against her center over her jeans hard enough to make her shudder.

"Mmm, you like that?" He whispered, kissing down her neck when he felt her thighs squeeze against his hand. He curled his fingers against her and pressed hard one more time before abruptly pulling away and placing his hand behind her head on top of his truck.

Joyce just stared at him stunned, trying to clear her lust filled mind to figure out what the hell just happened.

"Let's go home," Hopper said with a smirk, reaching around her to open the door.

Swallowing, Joyce carefully pulled herself into the cab once her legs started working properly and watched Hopper slide in next to her. She honestly had no clue what to say. If this was even the slightest hint to what she'd been putting him through, she kinda felt bad.

Before Hopper put the keys in the ignition, he turned to face her. "You alright?" As much as he got a thrill out of teasing her, he also wanted to make sure he hadn't crossed a line. The fact she hadn't said anything made him a little uneasy.

"I am so sorry." She finally said after a minute, resting her hands in her lap.

Hopper reached over to place a finger under her chin and smiled when he met her eyes. "Why are you apologizing?"

Joyce turned her head slightly to kiss his palm. "Because that's

torture...and I've been teasing you for days."

With a chuckle, Hopper kissed her forehead and straightened in his seat to turn the ignition over. "You can make it up to me later." He said with a wink and pulled out of the parking lot.

When they arrived back at the farm, Hopper parked his truck in his usual spot and noticed his mother's car was gone.

"Guess we have the place to ourselves." He informed Joyce, opening his door.

Greg worked late at the station on Thursdays and wouldn't be home until sometime after dinner, and even if Mary was only gone for another twenty minutes, he'd gladly take advantage of any second he got to be alone with her.

Planning to put off chores for as long as possible, Hopper unlocked the front door and instantly went into the kitchen to undoubtedly have a drink of milk straight from the carton.

Joyce followed behind him and dropped her book bag onto the kitchen table, shaking her head when she found him wiping his mouth and shoving the milk back into the fridge.

"Mom won't be home for a few more hours." He announced, pointing to the note Mary had left on the counter.

"Should we knock out our chores first or get started on homework?" Joyce asked.

Hopper raised his brow. "Um, neither?" Pushing himself away from the counter, he joined her beside the table.

Joyce smiled as soon as she saw the look on his face. "Hopper..." She threatened, taking a step back to avoid the tickle she knew was coming.

"What?" He said with a grin, trying to act innocent.

"Don't you dare." Joyce pointed at him, continuing to create a distance between them.

A brief twitch in his hand was all it took for Joyce to yelp and take off running up the stairs.

"Hey!" Hopper called, almost tripping over a rug on his way after her.

Catching her just outside of his bedroom, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders from behind and blew a raspberry in the crook of her neck.

Joyce half halfheartedly struggled to get away and started giggling when he continued his assault across her collarbone and to the other side of her neck.

Somewhere in the middle of his lips skimming her throat and his hands tickling her anywhere he could reach, they ended up in his room and on the bed with Hopper pulling her shirt up enough to nip the skin at her side.

"Hop!" Joyce laughed, jerking her side away from his mouth when she couldn't breathe. "Ok, ok! I give!" She managed to choke out, pushing against his head when he blew on her stomach.

Finally deciding she'd had enough, Hopper lifted his head and placed his chin just below her navel. "You're so damn cute when you laugh." Just being able to see her happy and knowing he was the one making her that way, caused his chest ache in a good way.

Reaching up to thread his fingers with hers, he pulled her hand down to press his lips to her knuckles.

"You know you can make me laugh without trying to kill me right?" She joked, untangling their fingers just enough to poke his jaw.

Hopper chuckled and playfully nipped at her finger. "You love it."

"Wrong." Joyce corrected. "I love you. I don't love being tickled to death."

Playfully rolling his eyes, Hopper scooted up her chest and kissed her slowly. His hand pushed her hair behind her ear and made its way down across her collarbone, over her shoulder and eventually down the length of her body to rest at her hip as he settled between her

legs, never breaking the kiss.

Lazily lifting her shirt, he caressed the newly exposed skin before dipping his thumb under the material of her jeans to brush over her pointy hip bone. Hopper's hips unconsciously flexed against her when she gasped, and he kissed at the crook of her neck to hide his groan.

Lifting his head to see her face, he smiled and reached for the button on her jeans, popping them open in one swift movement. When he felt her tense, he saw her eyes searching his and stilled his hand.

"All you have to do is tell me to stop." He offered, trying to keep his voice level to not give away how nervous he was suddenly feeling.

The room stayed silent other than their breathing and Hopper took that as his queue to continue, but before they went any further, he stood and shut his bedroom door, locking it for good measure. He licked his lips as he took in the sight in front of him, Joyce laid out with an arm above her head, the other resting on her chest. Her shirt now barely covering the top of her stomach. A sight he had dreamed about on more than one occasion.

Making sure she was still watching him, he reached down to readjust himself in his pants as he walked back over to her, not missing her eyes dropping to his crotch and her lip finding its way between her lips.

"W...what...are we about to have sex?" Joyce finally voiced and propped herself up on an elbow. Finding herself confused as to what was happening.

Hopper leaned forward and placed his knee on the bed beside her. "That wasn't my intention..." He admitted, noticing the slight panic in her features. "And from the look you're giving me, it wouldn't have happened even if I wanted to." He teased, kissing her forehead. "What is it you said at the tree house? Oh yeah, I'm just messing around."

When he saw her instantly relax, he couldn't help but chuckle. "If that's alright with you?"

Joyce gave him a nod and swallowed, trying to calm her nerves.

"I'm serious." Hopper started, shifting them around so she was further up the bed with him laying at her side. "You tell me if anything makes you feel uncomfortable." After their talk about the attempted rape and her possibly being nervous in general to the entire situation, he wanted to take extra precautions to not push things too far too fast.

Without speaking, Joyce grabbed his cheeks and pulled him in for a kiss, distracting herself as he worked his way back down her body to continue where he'd left off. Instead of going for her zipper like she expected, he pressed his fingers over her jeans and between her legs, gently rubbing back and forth a few times, testing to see her reaction each time he added more pressure. Unable to hold back a moan, Joyce sucked in a deep breath and thrust her hips against his hand, only to have him suddenly stop, much like he had back in the school parking lot.

Hopper continued to explore her mouth, ignoring her pout and finally pulled her zipper down. His fingers lingering just above her panties to tease the skin there, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

The sound that left Joyce's mouth when his fingers slipped under the soft cotton of her underwear and down between her slick folds, almost killed him.

"Jesus...you're so wet." He whispered, nipping below her ear as his middle finger circled her clit, causing another soft cry to pass her lips.

Hopper had zero experience in this department, only going by what he'd seen or heard from others, and the fact that she hadn't stopped him yet was enough to give him a slight confidence boost. Hell, the fact she was practically soaked through her clothes had him feeling like he'd just won the lottery.

Sitting up a little more to see her face, Hopper continued to lightly stroke between her folds and back around her clit with two fingers until everything became a slippery mess. Her eyes were rolled back and the hand on her chest was now fisted into her shirt, her breathing coming in quick pants. When she started a slow rhythm with her hips in time with his hand, Hopper chose then to slip his

middle finger inside her and she instantly clamped around him, causing them both to moan.

"Still ok?" Hopper asked, moving his finger in and out of her slowly as he continued to keep pressure on her clit with his palm. When she wrapped her hand around his wrist and made him press against her harder, he knew that was her answer. He also knew he was doomed in holding back his own arousal and used his free hand to quickly get his pants open.

Joyce opened her eyes at the sound of his belt buckle coming undone and lost all coherent thought when she watched him start stroking himself. Before she knew what was happening a heat washed over her body and she was coming hard against his hand, biting her lip to keep from screaming as the most intense feeling she'd ever felt flooded her senses.

"Shit Joyce..." Hopper groaned as he watched a burst of pleasure invade her features. That mixed with her clenching around him was enough to send him over the edge. Quickly finding her lips, he kissed her desperately as he spilled over his hand and onto her stomach, surely hitting the bed as well.

After a minute, Joyce lifted her head to stare at the mess he'd created. "Hop...ew." She joked lazily with a giggle, looking at the lower half of her clothing to make sure nothing landed on it.

"Sorry." He laughed and pulled his shirt over his head to start cleaning up the mess, knowing he'd have to do laundry before his mother got home. "Why are you shaking?" He asked when he started wiping off her stomach.

Joyce shook head and smiled, still riding a slight high from her orgasm. "I don't know, but I'm alright."

Tossing his now dirty shirt toward the door, he tucked himself back into his boxers, not bothering to close his jeans as he settled against her side.

"You're not cold are you?" Wrapping an arm around her waist, he pulled her closer, letting her head drop against his shoulder.

With a sigh, she tried to will her body to settle down and curled into him. "I'm fine Hop. I just feel good is all."

"So this is normal?" He asked, a little concerned when he could still feel her trembling.

Joyce shrugged and buried her face in his neck. "How would I know? This is the first time I've ever done this."

Hopper sat up slightly and stared down at her, not saying anything for several seconds. "Wait...I mean, I know this is the first time you've ever done anything with someone else, but with just yourself...You've never?..." He motioned with his hand toward her jeans.

When she shook her head, Hopper's jaw dropped in disbelief. If he felt an ego boost before at being able to get her off his first time trying, his pride was out the roof with the newfound knowledge of giving her the first orgasm she'd ever had.

He supposed it made sense when he thought about it. Living with Travis and dealing with the nightmare of his existence, didn't give her a lot of free time to worry about her own pleasures when she was struggling to keep everyone else around her happy. Choosing to not dig further, he reluctantly pushed himself to sit.

"Come on, I need to wash the comforter and my shirt before-"

"Jim, you home?" Both teens froze at Greg's voice coming down the hallway, neither of them hearing him enter the house.

Joyce instantly panicked and quickly stood to button her jeans, Hopper doing the same as he went to his closet to grab a new shirt. He didn't get very far before the knob on his door jiggled.

"Jim!" Greg yelled. "Open this door, right now."

"Fuck." Hopper mouthed, turning on his heel to do as asked, deciding to forget the shirt to not piss his father off more by taking even longer.

When Jim opened the door, the first thing Greg's eyes landed on was Joyce standing beside the bed with her arms wrapped around herself,

looking more guilty than he'd ever seen before. Then of course his son in front of him half-dressed. Both of them sported the same messy hair and swollen lips. A clear sign they were doing something they probably shouldn't have been doing.

"Why was the door locked?" Greg asked, placing a hand on his hip as he leaned against the wooden frame.

Jim cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. "Um..."

Greg sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, not wanting to deal with this after the day he'd had. "You know better son, and now that you two are dating, you're lucky your mother and I still allow you two to share a bed in our house." Greg met Jim's eyes then, making sure he understood. "Get dressed and go do your damn chores." Without another word Greg pushed away from the door frame and headed toward his bedroom.

Joyce sat back down on the edge of the bed and rubbed her hands over her face, feeling somewhat mortified. "Doesn't he usually work late on Thursdays?" She whispered.

"Yeah..." Hopper replied as he went to get dressed, trying to put a finger on his father's mood. It wasn't like him to snap like that, especially if he had the opportunity to embarrass him instead. The fact he chose not to after catching them in a somewhat compromising situation had him a little uneasy.

The sun had just started setting when Mary finally returned to the farm. Joyce and Hopper were sitting on the porch steps removing their boots, having just finished their chores.

"Need any help mom?" Hopper called when Mary opened the car door.

"No honey I got it, go on inside and get cleaned up for dinner."

Eyeing the take out bags, Jim held the door open for her and took Joyce's hand in his, pulling her upstairs. They hadn't really said much to each other as they took care of the horses, both of them trying to make sure everything would be finished on time since they had

gotten such a late start. The tension left by Greg was still there and they both felt it.

Joyce finally broke the silence as she pulled on a pair of too-large sweatpants. "Do you think your dad will say anything to your mom about what happened earlier?"

"Probably..." Hopper sighed. "They don't usually keep things from each other."

"Will she be mad?" Joyce shoved her hands in her pockets and stared at the floor.

"Hey." Reaching out to pull her into his arms, Hopper kissed the top of her head, sensing the change in her mood. "It'll be alright. Even if she is mad, you know how she is. She'll probably just give us a lecture and after we have dinner things will go back to normal."

"I can't afford to have your parents angry with me, Hop...If I mess this up I have nowhere else to go." She sighed, dropping her head against his chest. "And it would absolutely kill me to lose them...or you."

"Joyce, look at me." He demanded, carefully grabbing her chin. "You're not going to lose anyone. My parents are nothing like Travis, or Linda, and you know that. They love you, just as much as they love me, hell they may even love you a little more than me." He teased. "Now come on, let's get this over with."

Knowing he was right, Joyce reluctantly pulled out of his embrace and followed him downstairs into the kitchen. Mary was sitting alone reading over the paper, the table set for three.

Hopper looked around confused before he took his usual seat. "Where's dad?" He asked, grabbing a fork.

Mary folded the paper and set it aside, taking a sip of her coffee. "He's not feeling well, so it's just us tonight."

"Oh." He said, scooping some food out of a container and onto his plate. "Is he sick?"

Choosing to stay quiet, Joyce pushed her food around with a fork,

not actually eating as she listened to them talk. She couldn't help feeling like maybe she was part of the reason Greg wouldn't be joining them.

"He just had a bad day at work is all. Not that finding you two this afternoon helped any." Mary scolded, giving them both a look.

The anxiety Joyce had already been feeling started flooding through her and she felt the familiar sensation of tears pricking her eyes. Taking in a deep breath, she dropped her fork and placed her hands in her lap, trying to make herself invisible as she got her emotions under control.

Ignoring the part about him and Joyce, Hopper continued to press his mother. "What happened at work?"

"Something about Joyce's case came up. It's nothing either of you kids need to worry about." She stated. "I promise you everything will be fine, your father just needs to rest."

Slowly lifting her eyes, Joyce looked between Hopper and Mary, the tears she'd been holding back finding their way down her cheeks against her will. "I'm sorry..." She whispered.

Focused on his mother, Hopper turned his head at the sound of Joyce's voice and stood instantly, almost knocking his chair over when he saw the look on her face. He knew she was already uneasy, but never expected her to react this way.

"Nothing about this is your fault, honey." Mary soothed, setting her mug down.

Joyce shook her head and got to her feet, taking a step back from the table. "Every bit of this is my fault..." She said, her voice so low Hopper almost didn't hear her. "I am so sorry." Just knowing she'd upset Greg with her problems, enough to make him avoid having dinner with his family made her want to throw up. All because of the baggage Travis had loaded her down with over the years, baggage that was now being unloaded onto the Hoppers. "I'll go...I'll stay at the tree house...I'll..." Joyce stopped talking when she felt her chest tighten and sucked in a deep breath. She attempted to wipe her eyes,

which proved pointless when more tears continued to fall.

Quickly picking up on her labored breathing, Hopper took a step forward and placed his hand on her shoulder, ignoring the way her body reeled away under his touch. "You have to calm down, Joy." He pleaded, knowing she was close to having a panic attack. "You're just overthinking. You know we love you." When she got that look in her eyes and started backing herself against the wall, Hopper acted fast and moved her into the living room to sit down.

He knelt in front of her and placed his hands on her knees. "Look at me Joyce." Surprisingly she met his eyes without hesitation. "Try to relax, please." He rubbed up and down her legs, hoping the comforting touch would help soothe her anxiety.

Mary stood by the entryway and watched for a moment to see if her son could get Joyce calm before she needed to step in, not wanting to make the situation worse for her by hovering. She knew the poor girl would be embarrassed enough knowing she'd had a breakdown in the middle of dinner.

"What's going on?" Greg's voice called from behind Mary, startling her slightly. She placed a finger to her lips, signaling for him to be quiet. Before he could respond, Joyce speaking directed their attention back to the living room.

"I'm no good for this family Hop...I've brought nothing but disaster with me." Continuing to watch her breathing, Joyce swallowed, but couldn't stop herself from crying. "I don't like knowing I'm the reason your dad is stressed to the point he's been locked in his room for hours and probably can't stand the sight of me."

"What are you talking about?" Hopper asked, reaching up to cup her cheek. "Everyone in this house loves you. You're the most important person in my life and always will be, and they know that. Nothing would ever make them abandon you."

Joyce reached up to remove his hand and shook her head. "The case...it's not worth it. I'll go somewhere Travis can't find me-"

"Absolutely not." Greg's voice broke through the living room as he

slowly approached his kids and took a seat next to Joyce. She tensed under Hopper's hand that was still on her knee and sniffed.

"Joyce darlin', I want you to listen to me. My mood tonight had absolutely nothing to do with you. I promise, you have done nothing wrong. I had a rough day at work. Some things that you don't need to concern yourself with were brought to my attention and honestly it pissed me off, so I came home. Then i found you two and..." Greg sighed, running his hand over his face.

"I just needed a few hours to get rid of a hell of a headache honey. You know as well as I do when you have a headache the last thing you want to do is eat a big meal, which Mary never makes or does take out in small portions." A small laugh escapes from Joyce's lips. Making the mood in the room shift instantly.

"I apologize for being short when I came home this evening. Are we okay?" Greg questions, turning his body to face Joyce and Jim who is still crouching with his hand on her knee.

"We're okay...I'm sorry. I just start to panic and it all goes downhill from there." Joyce confides, not knowing if Greg and Mary understood how her attacks were triggered.

"No need to apologize darlin', like I said, I acted horribly. If anything the chaos of tonight is mostly my fault." Greg looks up at Mary and catches her eye. She stands from the entrance of the living room and comes to stand behind Jim.

"Joyce honey, why don't you help me warm dinner back up real quick, I'm sure Greg is hungry now that his headache is gone. Besides, neither you or Jim really ate anything earlier."

Hopper stood from the floor, his knee giving a slight pop as he did so. Moving to allow Joyce to walk into the kitchen with his mother, he felt a hand lightly touch his arm. Looking down, Greg had reached for him, silently signaling for him to stay behind. When Mary and Joyce were both safely back in the confines of the kitchen, Greg leaned back on the couch, his hands once again going up to massage the bridge of his nose. At this moment, Hopper noticed his father had more grey in his hair and dark circles under his eyes.

"Sit down Jim." Greg states, moving over slightly for his son to sit beside him. The two men sat in silence for a moment, neither of them sure who was going to speak first. Finally, Greg sat up and cleared his throat.

"Jim. What happened this afternoon doesn't need to happen again. It was different before. You and Joyce weren't dating a month ago, so it was fine for you two to share a bed. Your mother and I were both confident that nothing sexual was going on between the two of you. But now... Now you're dating and Jim ...I'll be damned if that girl doesn't get to go to college because she gets pregnant. She has worked too damn hard and come way too close to reaching her dreams for them to be postponed indefinitely because of an unplanned pregnancy. Do you understand? Your bedroom door is to remain unlocked at all times and if you and Joyce are both in there, with the exception of going to sleep, that door is to be opened at least three inches. Your mother and I will drop in from time to time, and no we won't be knocking. Do I make myself clear?"

Hopper nodded but didn't look his dad in the eye. He adjusted his collar, not wanting his father to see the blush that was creeping up his neck. He was a grown man for fucks sake, he shouldn't be blushing at having the talk with his father. Hopper already knew they needed to be safe when the time came for their relationship to go to the next level. The sound of his father laughing made him look up. His dad was actually laughing, something he hadn't heard much in the past few weeks.

"What's so funny?" Hopper asked with a smile, finally making eye contact with his old man.

"I just thought of something. God forbid you knock her up before you're married. But if for some reason you do, I can't even threaten to shoot you for defiling my daughter! Obviously, I can't shoot my own son ya know?" More laughter escapes from Greg who is now attempting to cover his face with his hand. Hopper sits quietly and stares at his dad, not sure if he should laugh or be slightly afraid. He had joked earlier that his parents probably loved Joyce more than they did him and right now he was starting to question that statement.

Greg's laughter finally died away and Jim saw him reach into his front pocket. Holding his hand out toward his son, Greg waited as Jim opened his hand and neatly placed a small gift there before getting to his feet. Glancing down into his hand, Hopper's heart stopped momentarily as he stared at the small foil packet resting in his palm.

"If the moment comes and you are both ready, make sure to use this son. I'm too young to be pawpaw right now, okay? This is the only one you're getting from me, so next time you gotta buy them on your own." Without another word, Greg left the living room and headed toward the kitchen, the delicious smell of dinner making his stomach growl.

Hopper took a second to collect himself as he sat on the couch alone, utterly confused. His dad had just told him not to have sex, but gave him a condom? Did that mean they had his blessing? Or was it just an, in case you can't control yourself sort of deal? Hopper's stomach growling brought him out of his head and he stood, sliding the condom into the front pocket of his jeans before heading back into the kitchen.

Ignoring the table as he entered, Hopper goes to the sink to wash his hands. The feeling of the condom in his palm had left a weird, dirty feeling for some reason. Finally sitting back down, he began to eat his food, completely lost in thought over his dad's conversation.

"Did you decide what you want to do for the float this year hun? The parade is on Saturday and we haven't even started yet." Mary questions over her fork full of broccoli.

"I think we're just going to ride the horses down the street, maybe have a banner or something to hold between the two lead riders. Then I figured Jim and Joyce could drive the blazer if they didn't want to ride a horse? Maybe throw candy out to the kids." Greg states, wiping his face with a napkin.

"Hop, are you okay?" Joyce asks placing her hand on his knee.

"Hmm? Yeah...I'm fine, just tired is all." Hopper sighed and pushed his plate away from him, suddenly asking to be excused for bed.

"That's fine honey, I know you've had an exhausting day." Mary smiled into her coffee cup, trying not to let the kids see her laugh.

"May I be excused as well?" Joyce questions, not wanting Hopper to be alone just yet.

"Of course." Greg answers for Mary. Standing up, Joyce places her plate in the sink.

"Should I sleep on the couch from here on out?" Joyce asks toward the two adults still at the table. She was willing to take her couch exile as long as it made them happy.

"That won't be necessary Joyce, Jim knows what we expect of him now. I'm sure he will fill you in once you're upstairs." Greg states, reaching out to hold Mary's hand. Joyce gave her adoptive parents a curious glance before backing away from the table.

"Umm, alright then. I'll just go upstairs. Goodnight guys."

"Goodnight Joyce." They said in unison.

Turning on her heel, Joyce practically runs up the steps toward Hopper's bedroom. When she enters she closes the door, automatically making Jim walk across the room to open it wide enough for someone to see inside.

"What are you doing?" Joyce questions, going to sit on the bed to take her socks off.

"We need to talk." He says coming to sit down beside her.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Dad wanted me to hang back a second when you and mom went to warm up dinner. We have some new rules to abide by. First, the door has to stay open at least three inches if both of us are here, with the exception of us going to sleep. Second, it can't be locked, third, they are both going to be dropping in from time to time and he said they weren't going to be knocking. He got the vibe of what we were doing earlier, and he's worried that you're going to end up pregnant and not be able to go to college." Hopper blurted out,

running his hand through his hair.

"Well, that's a lot to take in." Joyce voiced, going to the closet to take off her bra. Hopper, most of the time a gentleman, turned his head to give her what bit of privacy he could.

"He also gave me a condom." He mumbled, hoping Joyce didn't hear him.

"He did what!?" She almost yelled, walking back over to the bed and climbing in on her side.

"Said that if we couldn't fight the urge that I needed to at least use protection, which I was going to do anyway. I am way too young to be a dad Joy. Hell, I can barely keep myself alive, let alone a tiny baby."

"I feel the same way, Hopper. With all this stuff going on with the trial and Travis, I honestly don't know if I would be able to handle being a parent on top of that."

Hopper stood and slid his sweatpants off. He'd be damned if he was going to sleep uncomfortable just because his parents were afraid of him and Joyce messing around. Walking across the cold wooden floor in just a pair of boxers, he turns the bedroom light off and leaves the door open just to make a point that they understood the new rules. Climbing in bed, he pulled Joyce to him. Resting her ass against the front of his boxers.

"We're going to be okay Joy, and I totally understand if you don't want to do anything else." He whispered into the top of her head, loosening his hold when she turned to look at him.

"Are you kidding? What we did...what you did earlier was amazing. I haven't felt that relaxed ever...I don't want to stop doing things, but I think just messing around is as far as we need to go for now."

"Agreed." He laughed as she settled back down into his embrace where he gently lifted her thin nightshirt and rubbed the cool skin of her hip.

"I love you." He whispered, placing a kiss to the crook of her neck.

"I love you too."

Greg and Mary quietly climbed the stairs an hour later, not wanting to wake the sleeping teenagers and Greg was the first to see Jim's door slightly open. Tiptoeing over, he peeked inside to see both kids were sound asleep. Joyce had her head resting on Jim's chest, his arm safely holding her in place. Greg couldn't help the grin that materialized on his lips. They were going to be okay. He knew his talk with Jim had struck some fear into the boy's heart. After all, he only wanted the best for Joyce as well. Quietly closing the door, he followed Mary down the hall and toward their bedroom, both of them ready to finally have this day over with.